

## Which Way for the Alter-Left?

Chaia Heller

### Introduction

Everyone in the Occupy Wall Street Movement is talking about revolution and social change. While these words roll off the tongue easily, many find it difficult to *define* precisely what they mean. It's not that folks are disinterested. Our lack of understanding about various forms of resistance and mobilization reflect a cultural problem of *revolutionary illiteracy*: Few in this country know are familiar with the history of the Left. Only a handful in this country understand its various strengths and limitations, and how we are reviving the Leftist tradition right here, today, at this very moment.

People around the country are showing that they are deeply committed to creating a movement for social change. They're coming to the conclusion that they could actually occupy *this* financial district, *this* bank, *this* city park, or *this* city-square—if they just showed up. By holding public meetings in which everyday people can have a voice, we're reclaiming not only public space, but also our public political identities as citizens: We're recovering our own *publicity*.

For years, the media has portrayed activists as saying what they don't want. This time, we're saying out, loud and proud: *Occupy This!* Today, the *this* we're talking about is direct democracy, moral economy, social justice, and ecology—to name but a few freedoms we've got up our sleeves. We're ready to occupy our lives.

In the Occupy movement, people have seized the militaristic term *occupy*, infusing it with a peaceful, democratic, and anti-capitalist sensibility. Now, the verb *to occupy* is a metaphor for taking hold of a kind of power that was ours all along.

We're Dorothy, at the end of the flick. But the green-faced witch was wrong; we don't have to surrender. All we have to do is click the heels of shoes we've been wearing all along and we're home.

\*

We're occupying Wall Street in New York City, the centers of our towns, as well as cities and villages around the country—and around the world. In doing so, we're expressing the same crucial sentiment: *We are the people who can occupy the public sphere.* We can create directly democratic forums that belong to us, the 99%, who, along with the rest of nature, occupy the planet. We can easily tip the balance so that we swing away from the bleak direction in which we're headed.

We all want more than to simply *occupy*—a word whose meaning points from the mundane to the horrific. Occupy is what renters do after signing a lease. It's what squatters do when finding a place to hang a coat and lie down. *Occupy* is also the stuff of military drones and their imperial masters.

The Occupy movement is about everyday citizens getting on the train that could lead us to a world in which we govern ourselves directly. We might have been deprived the rich history of what direct democracy has meant. But we know it entails more than begging elected representatives to make decisions on our behalf.

**This document is a draft in process. Please do not reproduce, circulate or cite without permission by the author.**

## **Part I: How Did We Get Here? From the Old Left to the New Left—and to the New Social Movements**

The calls for democracy in the Middle East during 2011 played a role in inspiring U.S. Americans to take to the streets in the so-called ‘free world’. Despite the many differences between movements for democracy around the world, many express a sense of political, social, and economic disenchantment. Such mobilizations tend to voice alienation from national and world systems that create political powerlessness and poverty. Each movement challenges a capitalist system and undemocratic forms of government that reduce citizens to wealthy passive consumers (the 1%) or to a mass of politically powerless, poor, and culturally despised (the 99%).

Let’s connect the dots. There is a clear link between the *Zapatista* uprisings of the mid-1990s that in turn gave rise to gatherings such as the *Peoples’ Global Action* and the *World Social Forum*. These alter-globalization movements were then clearly linked to the *anti-WTO protests in Seattle, 1999* which continued in the U.S. and abroad well into the mid 2000s.

And so now, we find ourselves in 2011. How did we get here?

### **1.1 *Back to the Future: The Bretton Woods System, past and present***

To understand how we found ourselves in the current political and economic crisis, we need to go back and rethink post-war capitalism as well as the Old and New Lefts. The economic crisis addressed by the Occupy movement has its roots in post-war neo-liberalism as well as in post-war development schemes that first repaired war-torn Europe and then set its sites

**This document is a draft in process. Please do not reproduce, circulate or cite without permission by the author.**

on ‘fixing’ the global South. Leaders from powerful nations met in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, during World War Two to discuss how to rebuild a global political economy in a post-war situation.

At these meetings, Bretton Woods agents established institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These bodies were designed to finance the restoration of Europe’s infrastructure and economy at the war’s end. Then, Bretton Woods agents would move to ‘develop’ Southern industry, markets, and resources to be circulated in a global top-down economy.

In 1948, the Bretton Woods agents focused mightily on the issue of global trade. That year, they began a series of trade-related discussions or ‘rounds’ to be called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (renamed the World Trade Organization in 1994). With this new trade apparatus in place, trade agreements would no longer be unilateral—meted out between two autonomous countries that would have the right to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to particular trade conditions.

Bretton Woods agents put in place the GATT as a *supranational body*, a group of national delegates empowered by, but acting independently from, other nation States. This supranational body would determine trade policies between many countries. Thus we see the emergence, for the first time in world history, *multilateral agreements* become central to trade-related decisions. In the multilateral system, individual countries (particularly poor countries) have limited power in decision making.

**This document is a draft in process. Please do not reproduce, circulate or cite without permission by the author.**

The Bretton Woods System played a key role in ushering in a political and economic culture of neo-liberalism and deregulation. And as most in the Occupy movement know, these problems led to the current economic crisis.

To borrow a term from Aldous Huxley (author of the novel, *1984*), terms such as ‘deregulation’, ‘free trade’, or ‘neo-liberalism’ are *newspeak* for a set of authoritarian political and economic policies. Euphemisms such as deregulation make pillaging poor societies appear ‘freeing’, normal, progressive, and inevitable.

Via the Bretton Woods System, powerful nations crush laws and policies designed to protect the natural resources, agricultural lands, and national/regional economies of poor countries around the world. These laws and policies had for years allowed the 99% to maintain—at least—degrees of cultural and economic autonomy and vitality.

In response to the Bretton Woods System, and to neo-liberalism generally, the tectonic plates undergirding the left—all over the world—have been shifting. Over the last forty years, the left has continued to reinvent itself as people try to make sense out of a changing post-war political economy.

### ***1.2 The old left: Before and after Bretton Woods***

The Old Left spanned from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1950s. It witnessed the Russian Revolution of 1917, the U.S. Great Depression of the 1930s, and post-war interventions such as the Bretton Woods System of the mid-to-late 1940s. In addition to weathering the red-scare of the 1950s that all but snuffed out the left in the U.S., the left has been struggling since 1980s to survive in a Reagan-Bush culture of conspicuous consumption and de-regulation.

Way back in the Old Left in the 1930s, though, revolution was just around the corner. The question wasn’t *if*, but *when* would a communist or socialist revolution finally topple

capitalism. The Great Depression in the 1930s led many in the U.S. to believe that capitalism was in the throes of its final crisis and would be immanently replaced by socialism.

Yet those in the Old Left were shocked when U.S. labor literally sold-out to the State and to corporate America as part of president Roosevelt's New Deal. Between 1933 and 1936, the State agreed to abide by labor's modest demands (social security, fair labor standards, support to poor farmers, housing acts, and so on). In exchange, labor agreed to abandon its revolutionary goal to overthrow capitalism—and the State.

Drained of its revolutionary vigor, U.S. labor would go on to establish a *mainly white working class* that would enjoy many of the benefits associated with the U.S. middle class. From the 1940s until the mid-1970s, white working class Americans relished in job security that included pensions, benefits packages, and social security. In addition, many often had enough income to buy houses, cars, and even to send their children to state universities.

The 1950s marked the hey-day of the depoliticized and stabilized U.S. white-dominated working class. It was also precisely during this time that leftists of all kinds were being tyrannized under anti-communist McCarthyism. The U.S. Red Scare drove much of what remained of the Old Left into the ground. Anyone suspected of being linked to communism or socialism, was expelled from institutions such as the government, schools, universities, and the media.

Some in the Old Left survived McCarthyism. Confused and dismayed, many tried to make sense of international capitalism during a bewildering decade. While enduring the insults of U.S. anti-communism, many in the Old Left were also saddened to witness a Soviet Union that had failed to realize their dreams of achieving a truly equitable and just socialist society.

Some on the left remained hopeful. If the Russian Revolution had missed its mark, and the U.S. worker hadn't yet overthrown capitalism, perhaps those in 'the developing world' would

do so. From the 1960s onward, the Bretton Woods System began financing newly freed colonies throughout the global South that had been drawn into the Western development model.

According to many Marxists, new workers emerging in the former colonies would drive a *rural proletariat* in impoverished nations to overthrow capital.

Instead, industrialization led to the rise of new ‘debtor countries’. These Southern nations had borrowed monies from Bretton-Woods agencies at soaring interest rates. A spiral of debt-related poverty began spinning that has lead Southern nations to sell off lands, waterways, and other resources through ‘structural adjustment programs’ as a way to pay off never-ending debt.

Yet, again, with great disappoint, many in the Old Left watched as new sets of proletariat throughout the global South failed to become revolutionary. Instead of crumbling, capitalism continued to thrive under the Bretton Woods regime for over five decades. The global South is dotted with many urban centers dominated by a culture of industrial capitalism. Yet these communities tend to be home to impoverished people who struggle to find access to land and water, while toiling for slave wages to stay alive. To this day, many socialists and communists are baffled by the ways in which the Bretton Woods System facilitated capitalism in extending and strengthening its global reach.

### ***1.3 Enter the New Left***

In the 1960s, McCarthyism was drawing to a close and a New Left was back and running. But there were major differences between the Old and New Left. While revolutionaries in the Old Left emerged from labor unions, and labor-based parties, the New Left rose primarily from within the heart of white middle-class America. In the 1950s, American white youth had come of age during the culturally and politically repressive McCarthy-flavored 1950s.

This youth tended to extend its focus beyond the conflict between capital and labor. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement provided inspiration and tactical direction for a New Left that wanted to redefine revolutionary vision and strategy. Largely spurred forth as a response to the Vietnam War, many youth who formed the New Left were enthused by Marxist Third Worldism and the writings of Mao Tse Tung.

They were also inspired by the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party, as well as SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee). They sought to echo these organizations' commitments to fighting racism, poverty, and as the 1960s wore on, the New Left gave rise to the second wave of feminism. A new women's liberation movement emerged that ultimately broke with the New Left as it became an autonomous part of the New Social Movements.

The organization, *Students for a Democratic Society* emerged as a key-organizing machine of the New Left. Many of its leaders were 'red diaper babies'—individuals whose parents were active in the Old Left. Even those who didn't hail from leftist family backgrounds were drawn to Marxist ideas as at the time. Marxism was then the primary body of revolutionary ideas that provided a clear and coherent foundation for political theory and action.

But Marxism could not adequately analyze the fact that it was often white students and people of color—not the factory worker—who were taking to the streets. Nor could it explain the increasing plasticity and adaptability of a Bretton Woods style global capitalism that transcended the revolutionary reach of workers, both North and South. By the late 1960s, an era of rabid capitalist deregulation was being ushered in. A new world disorder was on the rise that couldn't be sufficiently understood or challenged by a Marxian framework.

#### **1.4 *The New Social Movements (and beyond): What Marx couldn't have anticipated....***

Along with the New Left of the 1960s, emerged the New Social Movements. These movements represented a departure from Marxist-dominated politics associated with the New Left, promoting identity-based politics such as black, women's, gay, and American Indian liberation.

At the same time, the New Social Movements took up single-issue causes such as ecology or militarism. In addition, the New Social Movements tended to promote not just democratic, but decentralized organizations. Aligning ends and means was important to activists who wanted their movements to prefigure, or reflect, the values of the society they wanted to create.

Unlike the New Left, the New Social Movements were deeply *expressive*. Across the country, people were creating forums in which many could communicate both resistance and alternatives to the system through music, art, fashion, as well as through expressions of sexual liberation.

People created spaces in which to articulate sorrows related to their own dehumanization. They also expressed joys at uncovering the possibility of creating a more humanistic world. Murals, poetry, music, and theater bloomed through the cracks of cities and towns that had been deadened by the weight of racism, sexism, and so many other forms of oppression.

By participating in sit-ins and illegal demonstrations in public places, activists physically interrupted business as usual. Freedoms many of us enjoy today including an end to Jim Crow, access to safe and legal abortions, and a challenge to anti-sodomy laws, were fought for by people who not only demonstrated and protested, but also changed State policy that made everyday life better for so many.

### ***1.5 The New Social Movements: Democracy and structurallessness***

A central contribution of the New Social Movements was opening a decades-long discussion about democracy. Veering away from the from Marxist based movements that tended to be top-down and authoritarian, many in these new movements were excited about how to radicalize politics beyond representational democracy.

The notion of *participatory democracy* emerged in the 1960s as a new way to replace the given social order with one that deeply engaged civil society. Citizens, rather than simply workers, would be a key revolutionary subject as people considered how to open up new spaces in the public sphere for citizen assemblies as well as new forms of local community self-governance.

In addition to thinking about ways to democratize society itself, many in the New Social Movements were passionate about creating movements that would embody the democratic features of the new society so many wanted to create. Thus was born, *movement democracy*.

Activists in the new social movements sought a corrective to rigid and hierarchical leftist parties or organizations. In so doing, they sometimes created leaderless, decentralized, and non-hierarchical groups that operated by using consensus decision-making forms still used today. These experiments with movement democracy were inspiring and helped to create a unique democratic culture associated with many of the New Social Movements such as the anti-nuclear movement.

Yet, too often, the term ‘democracy’ was used to validate an absence of organizational structure all together. In the late 1960s, Jo Freeman described this problem in her essay, *The Tyranny of Structuralessness*. As Freeman explained, the tyranny of structuralessness (the TS Effect) can occur when well-meaning activists emphasize values of non-hierarchy, inclusiveness, and spontaneity over values of hierarchy, exclusiveness and rigidity.

While such a revalorization is positive, sometimes the TS Effect emerges as groups trying to embody democratic principles end up allowing *de facto leaders* to emerge. While some dominating leaders owed their positions to racial, sex, and class privilege, others gleaned their authority from their charismatic personalities. Without clear organizational structures, many in the New Social Movements created groups so loosely defined that anyone at all could join or lead the movement—sometimes regardless of their politics, personality, or agenda.

In exploring the TS Effect, activists in the New Social Movements began to understand the liberating potential of creating structured organizations. Paradoxically, many saw that more formal and transparent structures could often prove more democratic. Such structures could allow members to determine and question various forms of leadership that otherwise ‘spontaneously’ emerged. Clearer and more accountable democratic structures also allowed members to participate in consciously creating guidelines about the rights and responsibilities of movement activists.

As the TS Effect shows, humans are social animals. As such, we tend to organize ourselves into institutional arrangements, both informal and formal. Culturally entrenched institutions such as racism, sexism, and ethnic hatred are insidious and powerful. Many in the New Social Movements learned that they needed to make a conscious effort to transparently structure organizations around principles rather than around individual personalities.

### ***1.6 From the general to the particular: An over-corrective?***

Seeking a corrective to the New Left, those in the New Social Movements failed to fully embrace the universal and internationalist orientation associated with the Marxist project. While Marx’s universal theory of revolution is problematic, his works masterfully pointed to the need to identify common values and principles needed to drive a revolutionary movement forward.

And while de-emphasizing universal (or general) theories regarding social change, the New Social Movements also were unable to sufficiently develop an internationalist perspective that would be part of a global humanitarian cause. The international feminist movement of the (1970s-1990s) was particularly successful in pursuing an internationalist agenda. Yet even here, we see an identity-based movement that like many others, failed to extend its reach beyond the necessary, but too particular needs, of a group of people (even if the group included half of the world!).

Again, while expanding notions of identity-based freedom, and of specific issues such as ecology, the New Social Movements also produced an over-corrective. By swinging in the direction of the particular, the New Social Movements failed to adequately address the international machinations of power wielded by various State around the world as well as global capitalism.

Too often, activists in the New Social Movements didn't sufficiently highlight the political and economic dynamics between those in the global North and South. A *politics of the particular* emerged that, while liberating to many, was limited in its potential to capture the revolutionary imagination of many around the world.

## **Part II. Enter the Alter-Left**

As discussed above, the New Social Movements began to wane in the mid 1980s during the Reagan-Bush period of reaction. Yet the Left never 'left' completely. Instead, it gradually phased into what is now the Alter-Left. The shift is significant in several ways. While the New Social Movements tended to be clustered around groups and organizations within particular countries, the Alter-Left is distinctly international in character.

There are two primary reasons for this international orientation. First, the Alter-Left emerged in tandem with the Internet. The 1980s marked the first time in history that activists could circulate information, independent news media, images, and video within seconds to others in distant and remote places. By the early 1990s, much (but far from all) of the world was wired to facilitate communication between groups and organizations globally.

Second, the Alter-Left was greatly spurred by the Zapatista uprisings in 1994. These events highlighted the impact of neo-liberal trade on a small isolated rural community of peasants. The Zapatista mobilizations opened a Pandora's box after which political cultures around the world would become increasingly international, anti-hierarchical, anti-neoliberal, and ecological. In addition, the Alter-Left's political culture would be marked by a social justice and democratic orientation.

The idea of neo-liberal globalization became a rallying cry to single-issue groups around the world who began to see their problems through a more internationalist lens. For decades groups around the world had been fighting for indigenous and peasant rights as well as for ecological justice. By the late 1980s, we see many groups begin to frame issues within the rubric of neo-liberalism, free trade, and deregulation.

As stated previously, the infrastructure of neo-liberalism is constituted greatly by the Bretton Woods System. As the Alter-Left comes into being, peoples around the world begin to name and resist that system, fighting institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

With each passing year, activists came to understand how these supranational bodies, along with state powers and capital, came to create the current global crisis that is social and ecological in nature. In the North, we see a vanishing middle-class, and an emerging two-tiered

society composed mostly of the poor and powerless (the 99%). In the South, we see debt-ridden countries struggling to survive on the little land, water, and resources allotted to them.

The Alter-Left is constituted by groups and individuals active within particular countries and communities. Yet they are tightly linked to broader international networks. By the mid-1990s, the Alter-Left became more pronounced as groups of leftists began to form gatherings, organizations, caravans and demonstration-protests on a national and international scale.

### **2.1 *Going Alter: Going international, going humanist***

While it is challenging to describe how one social movement phases into another, the Zapatista Uprisings that began in 1994 provide a good place to trace the rise of the Alter-Left. On New Year's Day of 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation raised international consciousness about the implications for peasants of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization generally. In this way, the Alter-Left directly addresses a Bretton Woods regime since its graded inception.

In addition to beginning a long-term grassroots uprising in Chiapas Mexico, Zapatista peasant-activists called for international *encuentros*, or gatherings composed of global activists seeking to support their fight against neo-liberalism. The first *encuentro* brought together six thousand activists from over forty countries. The vision was to create a collaborative global network of resistance to free trade. In addition, the Zapatista cause spoke to many who had been involved in New Social Movements. In particular, the Zapatista's ability to link problems of neo-liberalism to questions of patriarchy, heterosexism, and peasant/indigenous oppression was key to bringing a new Alter-Left into being.

At the second Zapatista *encuentro*, held in Spain, activists decided to establish an ongoing counter-institution to the neoliberal World Economic Forum. The World Economic

Forum (established in 1971) meets annually in Davos, Switzerland. Like the Bretton Woods meetings, the World Economic Forum brings together leaders from mostly powerful nations (known today as the group-of-20 countries, or G-20). Meeting behind closed doors, politicians, industry officials, scientists and journalists gather together to assess and direct the overall shape of the global economy.

In 2001, activists held the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Brazil is 'home' to one of the most robust movements of landless peoples). Since that time, the World Social Forum has met annually, providing networking space for activists around the world. In these spaces, activists may monitor and respond to global problems including climate crisis, poverty, labor conditions, feminism, human rights, and the survival of peasant and indigenous cultures worldwide. To make itself more accessible, World Social Forum holds smaller, regional gatherings as well in different parts of the world.

The World Social Forum is associated with the popular slogan, *Another World is Possible*. 'Another' is a key word in this slogan. This term is in turn linked to the notion of *alterity*, a word derived from the Latin 'other'. The word 'another', invoking the idea of 'another' world scenarios, resonated with the hope of many that the world could be shaped by a range of other possible sets of beliefs and values that are more ecological and humane.

The notion of alterity was first popularized in 1970 by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The term suggests that a multitude of other points of view exist in the world. On the one hand, those in the Alter-Left search for other worldviews eclipsed by neo-liberalism. On the other hand, the Alter-Left is searching for other *leftist* approaches to the process of societal change. Many in the Alter-Left hope to shape other approaches to political change that may transcend limitations associated with the sectarian left.

The term *Alter-Left* also signals another agenda. At the peak of the anti-globalization movement in the early 2000s, many questioned the use of the prefix *anti* as a way to describe a movement. *Anti* signaled what groups rejected, rather than what they embraced. In response, many in the U.S. and in other countries, began using the term ‘global justice movement’ to communicate a both a critical and positive outlook.

Also searching for an alternative to the prefix *anti*, European and Latin American activists began referring to an *alter-globalization* movement. Here, the term *alter* (linked to the idea of alterity) pointed to the idea of *alternative* globalization. The French term *alter-mondialisme* (other-worldism) at least in part inspired others in the emerging Alter-Left to use *alter* as a way to distinguish themselves from right-wing activists who used the term anti-globalization.

Seeking to establish themselves as internationalists interested in created a unified and harmonized world, activists thus sought to redefine the term globalization, endowing it with a prefix that indicated a desire for another possible world. The alter-globalization movement became a loose aggregation of organizational gatherings and protest mobilizations. Those active in these projects tended to promote an alternative to neo-liberal forms of capitalism seen as diminishing ecological integrity and human vitality around the world.

## ***2.2 The Alter-Left and the rise of the international non-organization***

One striking characteristic of the Alter-Left is its rejection of rigid party structures. Like many in the New Social Movements of the 60s-80s, the Alter-Left is cautious of groups and projects associated with a *sectarian Left*. Leftist sectarianism traces its history to communist, socialist, or anarcho-syndicalist groups overly invested with denouncing other leftist groups—rather than working together to challenge a system deemed oppressive to all.

Leftists today often see sectarianism as promoting destructive infighting within the Left as well as leading (in a worst case scenario) to a Stalinist-like purge of a Leftist movement that actually could bring physical harm to individuals within Leftist movements.

A close cousin to sectarianism is *political vanguardism*. First popularized by Lenin during the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, the vanguard saw itself as an intimate intellectual unit required to protect the integrity of Marxian theory central to the revolutionary project. A vanguard, for instance, might seek to educate and prepare a populace to become revolutionary. Members of a vanguard often envision themselves as free of false-consciousness that keeps the rest of the populace from seeing the need for dramatic societal change.

Still in the shadows of vanguardism, many in the Alter-Left seek to create informal networks rather than formal organizations. Often, Alter-Left groups lack clear criteria for membership, bylaws, or member responsibilities. Instead, activists fashion leaderless gatherings rather than organizations. The Alter-Left's *principle of inclusivity* rises as a virtue in itself when contrasted to Leftist sectarianism and vanguardism.

Instances of non-organizations abound. In 1998, a key Zapatista gathering took place in Geneva, Switzerland. At this meeting, activists established the group, Peoples' Global Action—a non-organization whose activity peaked during between 1998 and 2008.

What are the features of today's non-organizations? Those that create them tend to make themselves less identifiable than those who organized other projects in the New Social Movements. Committed to having no formal visible leaders, *de facto* leaders and organizers arise and cycle through Alter-Left networks, unbound to explicit sets of organizational rules, expectations, or standards. Today's Alter-Left non-organization is free from many of the authoritarian trappings of previous Leftist institutions. Yet the non-organization is unable to

provide a clear set of objectives, principles, or road map that might lead the Alter-Left in a revolutionary direction.

Non-organizations provide sites for networking and coordinating among explicit organizations. Yet many wonder if the enormous resources that go into creating non-organizations such as the World Social Forum are worth the networking and communication that ensues at each gathering.

The Peoples' Global Action is a good example of a non-organization that exists as an informal network for communication and coordination. As a non-organization, the Peoples' Global Action has no members or leaders empowered to speak on its behalf. Group members select 'conveners' from time to time charged with organizing conferences and overseeing communication.

Peoples' Global Action is careful to avoid creating binding principles that could impinge on its mission of inclusivity. As such, it took the group several years to adopt an explicitly anti-capitalist stance as part of its five hallmarks. Taking an anti-capitalist stance (not merely an anti-neoliberal one) proved important as group members tried to distinguish themselves from right-wing members of the anti-globalization movement.

Another form that the Alter-Left assumes is the mass-protests largely associated with the late 1990s to the mid 2000s. The great mobilization against the World Trade Organization that took place in Seattle in 1999 embodies much of the sensibility and features of the Alter-Left generally. As in Seattle and other mass-protests, hundreds or thousands periodically gathered around the world to demonstrate against injustices associated with the loaning and trading agencies in the Bretton Woods System.

These mass protests are inspiring expressions of refusal; People from around the world gather to march the streets and have their say about the effects of neo-liberalism on peoples and

natures globally. Mass protests tend to be good media magnets: they raise popular awareness of both the problems related to neo-liberalism, while also reminding the world that resistance to the system is still alive and well. These mobilizations provide critical spaces for collective education, as well as movement building.

But like many mobilizations in the Alter-Left, mass-mobilizations are non-organizations. Instead, they represent the coming together of organizations and individuals who often identify with a range of political and economic positions. While empowering and informative, mass-protests tend to prove unable to generate momentum on-the-ground. Alter-Left mass mobilizations are often ideologically supportive of grassroots organizations. Yet too often, protest organizers failed to sustain connections with local organizations with whom they worked while before and during the mass-actions.

Yet despite these limitations, the Alter-Left has much to contribute to those seeking to set themselves on a revolutionary trajectory. Clearly departing from reactionary anti-globalization, most groups in the Alter-Left espouse a general set of loosely defined values, hallmarks, or principles often similar to those adopted by many in the New Social Movements. Values of anti-neo-liberalism (or anti-capitalism) are central to the Alter-Left as well as a promotion of non-violent civil disobedience and group democratic process. In addition, the Alter-Left tends to adopt an ecological perspective while taking a clear stand on denouncing racism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, and ethnic hatred.

The Alter-Left thus moves beyond the limits of the New Social Movements of previous decades. By promoting an internationalist and humanist vision, Alter-Leftist movements bring together questions of social justice, global capital, and ecology. Greatly facilitated by the Internet and international travel, this expression of Leftist activism often assumes the form of mass-

protests, great conference-like gatherings, and most recently, the emergence of yet another non-organization, the Occupy Movement.

It remains to be seen whether the Alter-Left will succeed in recovering from an over-corrective to Marxist centralization and organizational rigidity. Will those in Alter-Left movements form sets of organizations capable of being directly-democratic and coherent? Out of the vast pouring of Alter-Leftist activity, will there emerge a group of people—or groups of people—able to articulate a clear revolutionary analysis and vision? Our window of opportunity is receding. Let's hope that we can literally 'get it together' in time to raise up humanity and the rest of the natural world, finding freeing ourselves from a capitalist, statist, and surpra-national system that threatens to undo us all.

### **Part Three: Addressing Power within the Alter-Left**

Some in the Alter-Left are veterans of the New Social Movements. They bring to the movement a democratic and non-violent sensibility associated with a previous era. Others are youth who have familiarized themselves with the history of the New Social Movements and want to become politicized today. Yet others have little or no awareness of the New Social Movements or the New and Old Lefts that preceded the Alter-Left. Many activists and groups, for instance, are drawn to the Alter-Left out of a shared political sensibility and critique of the current national and global system.

Bringing together a diverse clustering of groups and individuals, the Alter-Left faces many challenges addressed by their predecessors in the New Social Movements. For example, those in the Occupy movement take on a set of political, economic, and ecological questions unique to this precise historical moment.

Crises such as the 2010 Wall Street bail out and climatic instability, for instance, present issues that require new perspectives and novel forms of strategic action. In addition, the Alter-Left is confronting questions *inclusivity, intra-movement hostility, econo-centrism, dual power,* and the *meaning of revolution* remain central to those struggling to forge a new kind of leftist politics. This section addresses the issue of how Alter-Leftists address questions of power and privilege within the movement as they touch on a range of issues as inclusivity, divisions of movement-labor, and intra-movement conflict.

### **3. 1 Talking about inclusivity**

Every social movement has to determine who should be included, represented, and embraced within a project, organization, or mobilization. In addressing such questions, two issues come to light. First, how do we make such decisions transparent? Second, how do we make our movements accessible to the widest number of people who seek inclusion?

As previously noted, many in the Alter-Left reject sectarian notions that one set of people have ‘all the answers’ and should thus exclude those determined lacking. Yet in seeking a corrective against sectarianism, many produce an over-corrective, swinging the pendulum from extreme exclusivity toward extreme inclusivity. If the New Social Movements dealt with the tyranny of structurallessness, the Alter-Left addresses the tyranny of inclusivity.

Many in the Alter-Left may at times find themselves in a state of ethical paralysis. We’re afraid to ‘judge’ who should be included, excluded, and on what basis. Yet when we back away from voicing our judgments, we aren’t being honest with ourselves. We make determinations everyday about whom to associate with. The task is to base our judgments and decisions on ethical criteria rather than on personalities or vague suspicion.

Often, we link buzzwords such as *diversity* to notions of inclusivity, suggesting that ‘diversity’ is a good in and of itself. ‘Diversity’ is drained of meaning when invoked singularly, out of context. What we’re really talking about is how to create movements composed of individuals and groups who represent particular voices in the collaborative choir for freedom. Criteria for joining that choir must be ethical, transparent, and principled.

The term diversity does indeed have meaning when we refer to differences generated by an array of cultures, identities, histories, and geographies. Using diversity as a way to talk about class differences, however, is confusing and misleading. Unlike positive cultural differences based on ethnicity, language, or indigenous identity, class difference isn’t a ‘good’ in itself. While it is certainly valid to valorize working-class cultures as part of cultural diversity, class difference needs to be understood simply as *wealth, poverty*, or gradations in between.

The term diversity also goes awry when we use it as a justification for including people within movements whose reactionary ideas are ‘diverse’ or ‘different’ from those held by those with Leftist agendas. Differences in ideas are inevitable and potentially beneficial. Yet at best they should be seen as *ideological differences*, rather than as ‘diversity’. At worst, framing incompatible right and left-wing political views as ‘diverse ideas’ can erase power dynamics that underlie the views of those aligned with powerful institutions.

A case in point: During in the ecology movement of the 1980s, there were many instances in which people argued, in the name of diversity, to include ecologists who were anti-immigration or anti-choice on panels addressing ecological justice. For these reactionary ecologists, immigration would bring harm to ‘Northern European’ stock that comprised the U.S. In turn, abortion would harm ‘unborn babies’, or fetuses regarded as having ‘intrinsic worth’ inherent within all living species.

As expected, anti-immigration or anti-choice speakers promoted racist, nationalist, or sexist ideas that, happily, resonated with few in the audience. What was regrettable in such situations was that instead of giving a speaking slot to a Leftist person of color or a radical feminist, they were given to political reactionaries.

Raj Patel and Kala Subbuswamy, Alter-Left organizers and writers describe the failure of activists to define criteria for whom to include or exclude within Alter-Left organizations (or non-organizations). As these authors suggest, Alter-Left groups such as the Peoples' Global Action unintentionally *exclude* people of color, women, and queers precisely by having no clear and transparent principles that would exclude hateful bigots from joining their ranks.

Alter-Left groups are at times uncomfortable defining principles relating to race and gender. Activists may assert that no one can 'speak for the movement' since 'there is no movement'. Groups that see themselves as a 'collection of individuals' unable to make decisions about race and gender, unwittingly leave themselves vulnerable to racism and heterosexism. So fearful of sectarianism, vanguardism, hierarchy, and centralization, Alter-Left activists may find themselves open to appropriation by racist and sexist groups who will happily include themselves within our ranks.

Anarchism and socialism are always Janus-faced. One facet of the far left is anti-hierarchical, anti-racist, and queer-positive, for instance. Yet another facet is a reactionary, nationalist, xenophobic, and generally disdainful of the Alter-Left's humanistic social justice vision. Right-wing libertarians (and sometimes fascists) may discover assylum within anarchist circles. They find common ground with left-wing anarchists who are anti-statist and anti-neoliberal.

Like many in the Alter-Left, right wing libertarians and many neo-fascists are disenchanted with the role of supranational bodies such as the United Nations, the World Trade

Organization, and the World Bank in using a hard hand in shaping the economy. While the Alter-Left calls for freedom for *all*, right-wing libertarians seek freedom from government regulation and freedom to capitalize without restriction anywhere at all on the globe.

Yet simply being anti-State and anti-neoliberal does not mean one is a Left-libertarian, socialist, nor an anarchist with a leftist orientation. Republican Congressman Ron Paul, a right-wing libertarian, has tried to ally himself with the Occupy movement. It behooves him to do so; he is desperately seeking to widen his media angle while garnering support for the Tea-Party by grandstanding at Occupy events.

As the Occupy movement has no defined leadership, structure, or criteria for inclusion, there are no grounds upon which to exclude anyone like Paul. And why does this matter? Because people like Paul stand against what most people in the Alter-Left stand for. And the media likes to focus on people like Paul to blur the objectives of the entire movement.

It is worth looking at Paul because he crystallizes the position of many extreme-right wing pundits and libertarians in the U.S. and abroad. While these individuals share some values with the Alter-Left, they deviate dramatically on issues that really matter.

For instance, like the Alter-Left, Paul opposes the World Trade Organization. But for Paul, the problem with the World Trade Organization is not that it destroys local economies and cultures around the world. Paul opposes the organization because he feels that the organization *hinders* countries and corporations from trading even more ‘freely’ and un-regulated.

Paul is fervently anti-immigration and anti-welfare. Like many in this country, he believes in a ‘small government’ that would give little to no money to immigrants and poor citizens. Paul is against environmental protection policies of all kinds and declares global warming concern to be the result of an environmentalist conspiracy. He doesn’t do better on the

racial front: In addition to critiquing the civil rights act of 1964, he is patently against affirmative action.

Without clear principles on which to base criteria for inclusion within movements, Alter-Left projects can be appropriated, discredited, and distorted by reactionaries looking for a podium from which to further their own cause.

### ***3.2 Inclusion-as-access: What to do?***

Another challenge for the Alter-Left is how to include individuals within a movement by making that movement economically, physically, and culturally accessible to the widest range of individuals possible. For instance, when we hold meetings during the day, we unintentionally exclude people who work 9-5 jobs. Yet if we hold our meetings at night, we exclude parents of children who must tend to them.

We make our movements culturally exclusive when our communication is primarily based on the Internet. We find ourselves edging out potential members of our community that can't afford a computer, cell-phone, or email access who need to be part of the movement. Cultural access also includes paying attention to the language we use in meetings.

Using too much scholarly or political jargon can prove exclusionary as well; If we speak in ways that are unfamiliar to individuals in meetings, we can lose the interest and participation of those kept out of educational or political institutions that shape the way we converse.

We make our movements culturally inaccessible when we fail to intercede when members of our group voice (intentionally or not) racist, heterosexist, or classist statements. If we make members of oppressed groups responsible for intervening on their own behalf, we inadvertently communicate that problems of race, sexism, and class are only the concerns of those most oppressed. When activists of privilege act as allies, stepping into awkward situations

in which movement members have done or said oppressive things, we take collective responsibility for making our movement more culturally inclusive.

Together, we have to make sense of the ways in which oppressions and inequalities outside the movement surface *in* the movement. While some activists have succeeded in making Leftist forums accessible to a wide range of people, others have failed miserably.

The Old Left had a truism useful for those thinking about matters of inclusion. It went something like this; How to move toward creating equality among unequals?

The word ‘inequality’ here has nothing to do with the idea of an individual’s worth as a human being. The working assumption of is course, that we are all equal as human beings and thus deserve respect and compassion. The word equality here points to material, physical, and cultural inequalities generated by the oppressive society that we are trying so desperately to change.

Our shared assumption must be that within the given society, there will always be everyday human inequalities among us due to biology, culture, or most often, both. Each of us is endowed with different degrees of knowledge, physical ability, experience, and so on. Yet these kinds of physical and cultural inequalities are exacerbated by *social inequalities* generated by a capitalist, racist, sexist, ableist and heteronormative society.

Unless we want a ‘vanguard of the privileged’ we have a responsibility to prioritize discussions about how to create a culture of equality among those *rendered unequal* by a society that literally thrives due to economic and political inequality.

Central to movement building, then, is creating educational spaces in which we teach and learn about each other’s unique differences, experiences, and needs that will help to level the playing field as much as possible.

The word *possible* is key here in that we have to acknowledge that total equality is a goal that must be strived for but can never be achieved. If we expect success in creating perfectly inclusive and equalizing movements, we will become demoralized and saddened by our inevitable failure. The best we can do is to keep our level of commitment and our ethical standards high. We need to constantly remind ourselves and each other to continually raise the bar toward making our movements as inclusive to those who want to be part of them.

### **3.3 *Criteria for inclusion: Shared principles and responsibility***

So how do we create criteria for inclusion without being exclusive? To begin, we can take a *principle-based approach*. In this spirit, we include individuals into a movement or organization who identify with and commit to a set of shared values. Groups and organizations can develop a shared set of general ethical principles that are transparent and dynamic yet stable enough to be meaningful.

A set of shared principles could be simply those often promoted by many organizations in the Alter-Left. When developing inclusion-related values, it is key that ethical principles be general enough to include a wide number of people with different beliefs and aspirations. Yet to have meaning, such values cannot be too general; they also need to be particular and specific enough to be meaningful. Values such as *direct democracy*, *moral economy*, *ecology*, *mutual respect* and *social justice* are a good place to begin discussing common ideals that will ground a groups' conduct and vision.

The principle of mutual respect is central to the success of any social movement. This principle translates into creating *codes of conduct* that require movement members to hold one another in high esteem. After all, showing mutual respect is crucial to becoming the kind of people we want to be in a free society.

Treating others with disrespect in a way that is racist, sexist, or heterosexist clearly defies a shared principle of social justice—even if we act disrespectfully without meaning to do so. If we make claims that are racist, sexist, or classist, then it is up to us, as a group to make such wrongdoings conscious. If movement members use intimidation, coercion, or derision toward each other, they violate values of mutualism; they defile the ideal that everyone in a social organization deserves to be treated with dignity.

In addition to basing inclusion on shared principles, we can take a *responsibility-based* approach to inclusion. In this case, we include individuals in our movements or organizations who demonstrate responsibility by engaging in particular kinds of service. Service can include joining committees and task forces that help build a movement. Taking responsibility in our movements also socializes us into developing a sense of accountability central to creating a good society.

A responsibility-based approach, however, must take into account the inequalities among us that affect the degree to which members can spend *time* serving the movement. We need to understand that in our capitalist world, time *is* often money. Time is a resource much like money, education, and physical ability. Those without jobs or housing, for instance, are often obliged to spend much of their time finding sufficient food and shelter to simply survive day to day.

Those among us struggling with addiction, often spend much of their time figuring out how to stay comfortable, healthy, and free from physical danger. Those who have just left prison, or who are in prison, inhabit a world of limited options. They face a direly compromised ability to participate in the very movements that need to change that world that condemns them.

As stated previously, those working long hours understand well the lack of available time to commit to movements. Mothers, grandmothers, and parents in general, have difficulty participating in meetings that are frequent and lengthy.

Any successful revolutionary movement needs to figure out how to include those without access to time needed to part of a movement. Holding meetings in spaces more physically accessible to the widest number of people is one way to bring a movement to the people. Those who cannot physically attend meetings can choose delegates to express their collective and individual concerns and opinions at those gatherings. In some (rare) cases, we can raise funds to attain on-line technologies that allow to skype or be web-streamed into meeting spaces.

Within meetings themselves, there are structural approaches we can take to make ourselves more time efficient. We can place limits on the number and length of time during which individuals speak in meetings. Doing so, must, of course, be done in a way that doesn't keep a wide variety of individuals from participating. An ethos of group inclusivity grows as group members become mindful of the time-sensitive nature of meetings.

We can all benefit from the kind of humility that comes from learning to speak less often and with brevity. Encouraging those who rarely speak to have the floor demonstrates generosity. Often, those most oppressed outside the movement feel the least worthy of voicing their ideas in the movement. Saving speaking slots for women, people of color, and others, structures in speaking time for those who often don't feel entitled to public witness.

A great paradox of so many social movements: a vast number of those most oppressed by society often lack the physical strength, time, or resources to oppose it. Thankfully, this paradox does not paralyze the revolutionary impulse completely. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, were generated by those who lived under destructive forces of racism and poverty. The very fact that these movements gave rise to voices

such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, or Angela Davis—to name but a few—attests to the miracle of the human spirit that can rise out of the ashes of dehumanization, despite everything.

There are so many historical examples in which the most oppressed, have possessed the physical endurance—despite their vulnerability—to take action against systems of domination. More recently, the Palestinians, the Zapatistas, as well as landless, peasant, and indigenous peoples around the world, have demonstrated the relentless ability of human beings to resist the most odious features of society.

One major concept that we need to explore is that of privilege. In the U.S., we see a hierarchical society composed of numerous overlapping systems of power. As a former slave society built on the near-extermination of indigenous peoples, the U.S. is home to those who will be assigned racialized privilege of varying degrees. Although the criteria for ‘whiteness’ has changed dramatically over the past century, there still exists an invisible and often unconscious and continually changing ladder of privilege related to race. The most ‘white’ would be those of Protestant decent in contrast to dark-skinned ancestors of former slaves.

Yet any understanding of identity allows us to see that racial identity, for example, is a multiplicity, rather than a singular or static identity. Despite frozen categories such as ‘black’, most African Americans in the U.S. have a diverse heritage that may contain American Indian, European, and other ancestors. Race-as-a- helps complicate static folk notions race that are scientifically outdated. Because racism (rather than static race) is real, we need to account for varying amounts of racialized privilege among African Americans. While white Americans are not always able to recognize class privilege, they are often unable to note that African Americans present a range of skin tones. In some instances, having a lighter skin tone can provide an African American in the U.S. with varying degrees of privilege.

Racialized privilege is a useful example of the notion of *relative privilege*. When we use the term relative privilege, we acknowledge that because each individual has multiple ancestries and identities, each individual is marked by gradations of class, racialized, and other forms of privilege.

When we meet others, we unknowingly ‘index’ them, reading their privilege the way we might examine the cover of a book. Yet often, we get the title wrong, failing to see the multiple and contradictory sets of identities that lay beneath the book’s cover.

For instance, we might meet a white man who we read as middle class, indexing him as having a good deal of privilege—which might be, in many instances, correct. However, we might later learn that this individual is queer. At times, this individual finds that his societal privilege is over-shadowed by heterosexism. His world might be one in which bigots treat him as a worthless human being deserving of violence or forms of societal deprivation such as joblessness, homelessness and so on.

The ‘intersectionality’ or multiple nature of identity indeed throws a wrench into the tidy categories we tend to put each other into. In the U.S., for example, is it common for corporations using affirmative action hiring practices to include people with less racialized or sex-based privilege.

An applicant who is a female and of Indian decent (or who is an immigrant from India) might satisfy affirmative action requirements as she would be indexed as a ‘person of color’ in the U.S. Ironically, this woman might come from a high status caste and class within India and might find it strange that upon entering the U.S., she is recast as an individual without racialized privilege. Without meaning to, this woman of relative privilege could end up accepting a job that otherwise might go to an African American woman struggling to survive in the system.

This example is useful in illustrating the ways in which privilege can change within and between countries, and how even within one country, such as the U.S., there are hierarchies of privilege that might grant more racialized privilege to a woman of Indian decent than to an African American woman.

Yet to complicate the picture even more, let's imagine that the woman applying for the job is Muslim and wears a hijab (a head-covering) in public. Suddenly, her racialized privilege might be trumped by her presentation as a Muslim woman in post-9/11 U.S.A.

So while this woman might possess class and caste privilege, enjoying her class privilege in the U.S., she could find herself quite oppressed the second she steps outside her home and becomes a symbol to ignorant Americans who could determine her a member of a detested 'anti-American' group.

One last example (there are too many to list here). A young woman might enter a movement meeting and be indexed as white and middle-class. And while it could be true that in many instances, this woman benefits dramatically from her light skin tone, we might learn that she is Jewish and grew up in a low income family and neighborhood. If she was raised in nearly any part of the U.S. except New York City (where most U.S. Jews live), she has probably experienced everyday anti-Semitism that has affected educational, employment, and other social opportunities.

While so many of us in our movements have tremendous rage due to the ways in which we have been denied privilege, some might express anger at the white woman or man in these stories, saying that they absolutely enjoy more privilege than a poor woman of color in the U.S. And this could be entirely true.

The point is that it is helpful to use the term 'relative privilege' when we speak of differences in power related to categories such as race, class, and sexual identity. Doing so

reminds us that we often have little awareness of the multiple nature of each other's identities, privileges, or oppressions.

Let us return to our discussion about how relative privilege affects our ability to serve the movements we are part of. A great maxim that emerges from the Left is worthy of consideration: 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their need' indeed applies aptly to the Alter-Left. Those most able, due to relative privilege, can and should serve the movement (if they feel moved to).

In turn, those in the movement who are in greatest physical need (such as those freezing in Zuccotti Park), should be attended to at all costs. While the Alter-Left might not have the resources to shelter, feed, and medically serve the most subjugated amongst us, we should continually strive to do the best we can, always making such goals a priority.

For those who have access to housing, education, and degrees of wealth, time is often less scarce. For movement members who have greater relative privilege, inclusion might entail showing up consistently for meetings over a period of time as a way to demonstrate commitment. Some groups or organizations might include members in a voting pool if they show service and loyalty to a cause.

The story of the Little Red Hen is useful in illustrating inclusion-related *rights through responsibilities*. The story hails from a Russian folk tale popularized in the U.S in the 1940s. In this tale, a hen asks a set of farm animals to *include* themselves in a group that will plant, harvest, and mill wheat required to bake bread.

The other animals are unwilling to be included in carrying out these tasks. And so, the little red hen does all of the work by herself. But when the rest of the farm animals spot the delicious bread emerging from the oven, they want desperately to be included in the little feast. This morality tale illustrates a clear message. Those unwilling to include themselves as

*responsible* agents in a project should consider forgoing their *right* to be included in enjoying the fruits of that project.

A little-red-hen story that shows up in nearly every social movement. Another case in point: A group of twenty or so people have meeting and working together for months, making great personal and material sacrifice to serve in their local movement against homelessness. One member of the group is a young woman, we'll call Sophie. Sophie shows up when she can to meetings. Despite the fact that she often fails to share many of the everyday burdens of the organization, she is granted voting and other privileges within the group—in the name of movement-democracy.

One frigid day in winter, the group is busily attending to a crisis; A woman in town has been suddenly and illegally evicted from her apartment and has found herself on the street with four young children as well as many of their belongings. The group needs to work speedily to address the emergency.

Yet that day, Sophie is among the group, and she is fixed on a question: should the group hire a costly moving crew and rent a pricey storage unit for the woman or should the group do what it had planned—save monies by finding volunteers in the community to help relocate the woman's family and belongings.

The discussion goes on for hours. The organization works by consensus, and so the fact that Sophie won't 'stand aside' means that consensus is blocked and the group finds itself in a stale-mate.

Meanwhile, the woman in crisis is being attended to, willy-nilly, by neighbors who agree begrudgingly to temporarily take her in. And while she is moving into her neighbor's house, many of her belongings are stolen by the members of the city moving crew and passersby. One of her children is nearly hit by a car during the hours-long ordeal.

In stories like these, the Little Red Hen doesn't have her day. But hopefully, we can learn from such situations, basing privileges such as voting rights on the actual time and service we give to our organizations.

### ***3.4 What counts as movement-responsibility or 'real work'?***

Yet determining how much 'work' activists do within a movement isn't as easy as in the story of the Little Red Hen. Sometimes it's tough to figure out what counts as 'real work' or service to a social movement. For instance, in the women's movement of the 60s-80s, many felt that they were doing the 'real work' by being mothers, raising and educating a new generation of men and women who would be free from sexism.

Other women felt that by not having children, and by being lesbians, they were able to do the 'real work' by dedicating more of their time to fight for issues such as women's health care, freedom from domestic violence, and militarism.

Yet other women felt that they were doing the 'real work' by attending to international feminism, working as allies with women in the global South fighting for reproductive freedom and health care, as well as working on a range of other issues. Still yet other women believed the real work lay in fighting racism and classism within the movement as well as in society.

The truth was, of course, that *all* of these women were doing 'real work'. The problem was that movement activists struggled to effectively communicate that real work takes place when individuals choose, through free association, to work on issues that they are drawn to due to need and desire. The movement also had difficulty in honoring the real work that was often bestowed upon particular groups of women—regardless of choice or personal inclination. Due to burdens such as homelessness, poverty, ill-health, and lack of time, many women were obliged

to take on specific tasks that were often less visible to the movement as well as being less satisfying.

Problems also arise when some peoples' movement work is seen as having higher status, visibility, and greater impact on the direction of the movement itself. Women at work at parenting, for instance, often felt that their labors were devalued and invisible both within and outside the movement. Radical lesbian feminists often expressed that their everyday on-the-ground efforts to build rape crisis centers and shelters for battered women were upstaged by highly visible feminists. Such 'liberal feminists' were blamed for writing on behalf of the movement in popular magazines and 'voicing the views of the movement' on television shows.

Women fighting the everyday effects of racism in their communities (which included men) sometimes felt that white women didn't recognize their endeavors because they believed feminism should focus *only* on women. Yet other women felt that their work was unseen due to the fact that they lacked formal schooling. Access to higher education could make it easier for women to write and speak publicly on feminist matters.

In the Occupy movement, ideas of whose work counts as 'real' are as present as in any social movement. Some activists feel that they are doing crucial work in 'holding down the space' in Zuccotti Park, before and after the October eviction. Day after day, activists deal with issues including sanitation, attending to occupiers' physical health and safety, as well as acting as buffers with the police.

Many drawn to the park come from the most dangerous and dehumanizing spheres of our society including prison, the streets, violent homes, and mental hospitals. There are thus countless traumatized individuals, young and old, inhabiting Zuccotti park. These trauma victims require attention, compassion, and resources.

Holding down the park is thus not only the work of defending a key symbol of the movement. It also means working to protect a vital space in which many are struggling to stay alive. Doing this work can mean a set of unglamorous tasks that bring little media or movement recognition.

Tensions arise as those holding down the space in the Zuccotti Park observe other activists engage in tasks that bring more recognition and less toil. Most agree that the movement needs people to attend to administrative efforts such as facilitating meetings, organizing media happenings, conducting educational forums, while also providing health and legal services to fellow activists.

Yet any movement must face a central question: How to be mindful of the ways in which we put into place (consciously or not) divisions of movement-labor? How to be aware of the ways in which divisions of movement-labor can either strengthen or weaken the movement itself?

If activists holding down the space in the park feel devalued and trapped in their position, they will most likely find themselves burned out after weeks, months or a year. Meanwhile, activists attending to administrative efforts may feel endlessly criticized by those holding down the park. In response, they too could turn toward cynicism, frustration, and burn-out.

Like the New Social Movements, many in Alter-Left movements want to end class divisions by overthrowing capitalism. Yet such movements often depend upon the time, money, knowledge, and other resources generated by capital. Often, resources used to support the movement are donated by those who benefit from the capitalist system. Sometimes anonymous ‘private donors’ give money to movements without entering the movement at all. At other times, resources of time, money, technology, and educational opportunities come from among activists of relative privilege working *within* the movement.

How we make sense of money and other resources flowing into and out of the movement is essential. If expenditures of donated monies are not decided upon in a transparent and democratic way, movement members can begin to feel suspicious and deprived.

Yet conversely, if each little purchase, if each money-related decision must be the product of great consultation, the movement can suffer from an inability to act quickly. In the name of accountability, we can create a spectacular mini-bureaucracy of transparent red tape. We have to grant limited autonomy to those engaged in making decisions about spending movement money—while also being mindful of how to make these decisions as democratic as possible.

There are no clear answers to how we strategize the ways in which money moves into and out of our movements. Once again, we must return to our principles, and use the best democratic process that we can when trying to continually raise our expectations for fairness and equality in our movements.

To return to the question of movement labor, we need to consider how such divisions often reflect divisions of relative privilege outside the movement. Often, those engaging in administrative works have educational and other civil liberties that allow them to speak, read, and write in ways that make the movement intelligible to media and other powerful institutions.

Meanwhile, those that hold down the space in the Zuccotti park often have less societal relative privilege; their social networks don't necessarily bring them into those of activists who engage with the movement on an administrative level.

Once again, these divisions of movement labor need to be rendered transparent and open for discussion within the movement itself. Ironically, those holding down the park may feel unable to attend meetings when they aren't held in the park itself—as doing so would bring them away from their everyday responsibilities. Yet there must be mechanisms that allow for rotation

of tasks that enables those working in the park to be central to decision-making about the movement as well.

And so any movement must find a way to anticipate and understand that there will always be those amongst us that have the ability to donate time and money, and others who have little of either, and who give only what they can. Naming and accepting this reality can help us to clarify our expectations of what each of us brings and takes from the movement at any particular time.

The Occupy movement in New York City faces a set of challenges not often met by previous movements. When the organization Adbusters first called for an action to ‘occupy’ Wall Street, few expected that the term occupy would literally mean taking over public space in which people would actually live. The movement began as a critique of neo-liberal capitalism, symbolized by Wall Street. It quickly expanded to embody a wider analysis of inequalities and injustices related to land, space, and housing.

The fact that people expand the notion of ‘occupy’ beyond problems related to capitalism is clearly no accident. The kind of poverty that leaves citizens without a safe and dignified place to live is directly related to the greedy policies that spit out from the mouth of the capitalist system.

Occupy NYC is a movement addressing ‘theoretical’ or abstract mechanisms associated with neo-liberal capitalism. It is also a movement charged with attending to the concrete everyday needs of those without ‘occupancy’ who have set up a tent city in Zuccotti park. Out of necessity, Occupy NYC—and other Occupy movements as well—have become real and symbolic sites in which people receive various components of social welfare that might have been previously provided by a welfare State.

The idea of occupying public spaces is not new to the political culture of the U.S. Activists have created *tent-cities* in previous decades as a way to physically demonstrate prolonged commitment to a cause such as war or apartheid.

In turn, homeless activists have set up tent-cities around the country during the past decades. In addition to providing consciousness-raising about homelessness, activists have used temporary encampments to offer relatively safe (yet clearly inadequate) places for the most desperate to live.

Generally, tent-cities are a source of embarrassment for the U.S. government. Local authorities will often destroy such spaces by raiding them in a military fashion, trying to make the inhabitants appear as criminals. By raiding tent-cities, police attempt to prevent others in the U.S. and abroad of becoming aware of the severe problem of homelessness and inequality in this country. Most often, the media and government discredit tent-cities by depicting them as harboring those most despised by the U.S. right wing—the ‘immoral’ and ‘impure’ that include peoples suffering from drug addiction, mental illness, or poverty.

What is unusual about the Occupy movement is that activists are called upon to care for those living in temporary and inadequate shelters while also trying to make sense of how to build a movement that can actually bring about a new society.

Sorrowfully, both efforts are compromised. Organizational and movement-building endeavors affected by the dire need to attend to real suffering in the city. At the very least, the Occupy movement is succeeding in drawing a glaring circle around crises of poverty in a society that otherwise renders such questions invisible.

The ongoing Occupation also creates a site in which Alter-Leftists can gather, network, as well as carry on various direct actions targeted at a range of powerful institutions. Many involved in Occupy New York City hope to take the movement a few steps further by ultimately

developing a set of revolutionary organizations capable of bringing about profound and lasting societal change.

### ***3.5 Revolutionary haves meet revolutionary have-nots: A historical pattern***

Throughout history, social movements have been peppered with those who have and lack degrees of power. Noting the relatively privileged backgrounds of those who inspire, lead, or work in revolutions does not discredit such individuals. It illustrates the fact that all revolutions tend to bring together those with and without many material and cultural opportunities. Sometimes those among us suffering from lack of power grow frustrated with activists enjoying higher societal rank. Yet by criticizing activists purely on the basis of their social background, we stand to lose many who might make key contributions toward advancing the horizon of freedom.

Revolutionaries such as Ghandi, Marx, and Che Guavera were born into positions of considerable class privilege and education.

Ghandi was the self-less leader of the Indian Independence Movement, using civil disobedience as a means through which to liberate India's impoverished from British rule. Yet he was born into a family of considerable economic and social status that allowed him to attend Law school in England and to travel internationally. Many who played key roles in the Indian Independence Movement also came from wealthy and higher caste families. Yet the movement itself was a popular one, dominated in number by the impoverished masses of that country. Somehow, the haves and have-nots worked together to topple a system that demoralized all.

In turn, Marx was born into a relatively wealthy family; his father owned numerous vineyards and was an attorney. Marx's family was able to side step a good deal of anti-Semitism in Austria by letting go of their Jewish identities. Converting to Christianity and changing first

names, helped Marx's family to gain wealth. This in turn made it possible for their son Karl to receive an elite education in philosophy at the university of Bonn.

Despite his relative privilege, Marx had a humanitarian perspective; his ideas were taken up by those most oppressed by the capitalist system the world over. The Russian revolution of 1917 was a coming together of intellectual elites and workers determined to understand communist theory, despite their forced illiteracy. Marx's writings inspired millions to overthrow dictatorships in China, as well as throughout Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Che Guavera was an Argentinean-born revolutionary who played a central role in the Cuban revolution. He came from a wealthy family which gave him the means to study medicine and to travel internationally. Yet his travels led him to witness and understand conditions of social inequality and injustice. During his relatively short life, Guavera identified and worked with the most exploited throughout many countries in Latin America. Despite his wealthy upbringing, he strove to become, and was accepted as, a man of the people.

Our more recent revolutionaries follow a similar pattern. Subcomandante Marcos is the spokesperson for the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Marcos hails from the intellectual elite of Mexico. Once a university professor, Marcos became a communist and turned his energies toward supporting Mayan peasants in Chiapas seeking land reform and autonomy from a hostile and greedy state. The collaboration between a man of relative privilege and disenfranchised indigenous farmers bloomed into a national and international movement, inspiring indigenous peoples and others to fight capitalism in ways that resonate with their own cultural traditions and sensibilities.

Angela Davis, a life-long revolutionary, author, and teacher, was raised in the deeply racist U.S. South. Despite oppressive conditions, Davis's parents both were college educated and Davis' father was a schoolteacher. Davis herself was able, due to scholarship, to attend

Brandeis University and become a university professor herself. As a college professor, Davis had vast educational differences with others in the communist, Black Power, or Black Panther movements in which she traveled. Yet she shared a humanistic vision that tied her to other African Americans, women, and to those around the world who resonated with her words.

Many revolutionaries are born into or attain degrees of privilege during their lifetimes. As such, they stand to benefit from the system precisely by not becoming revolutionary. From Karl Marx to Angela Davis, we see individuals who could have used their (inherited or earned) power to gain even more power within the given social order. Yet when we examine the lives of people with relative-privilege involved in social movements, we see something interesting. For some reason, these individuals choose to use their economic and cultural status as a resource for social change, rather than for personal pleasure or aggrandizement.

Recognizing the contributions of those who have been afforded more societal opportunities need not lessen our appreciation of those who create revolution without access to power. Indeed, those who come from a life of poverty and oppression clearly benefit far less from the system they seek to change. Yet despite their demoralized and dehumanized societal status, they make a pivotal choice as well. Instead of using their own first-hand experience of oppression to become paralyzed and powerless, they use their experience as a prized resource for social change.

The roster here is too long to enumerate: Sojourner Truth was born into slavery and went on to become a key voice in the movement against America's 'peculiar institution'. In more recent history, Wangari Maatthai of Kenya, was born into a society under colonial rule. She rose to become the founder of the Green Belt Movement that gave water, food, and empowerment to thousands in her country.

Those who live within, or at the mercy of, the ‘belly of the beast’ have crucial lived experience. They know what hierarchy looks and feels like not just intellectually, but viscerally. It is often a happy accident of history that individuals within social movements find themselves working and learning alongside of those with whom they might have never met outside of the movements they are part of.

### ***3.6 Social movements as forums for expression of societal frustration***

Alter-Left political organizations provide forums in which the most dehumanized among us find our voice. Individuals who have no other place to bring oppression-related rage and sorrow are drawn to leftist movements, organizations, and other progressive spaces such as schools and cooperative projects. Where else, in a world segregated by race and class, can marginalized peoples find those willing to receive their words?

The Occupy movement must dignify the everyday indignities faced by those without shelter, food, security, safety, or a sense of an inspiring and promising future. Having experienced, first-hand the realities of everyday racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, the most marginalized in Occupy have much to teach those who know little about what it means to suffer American style. In turn, those with relative privilege must meet these stories with an eager and empathic ear; we are all spiritually and politically elevated when our consciousness is raised by learning the realities of those who have gone without.

A movement such as Occupy has (at least) two lofty goals. If the first goal is to open spaces for self-expression and consciousness-raising, the second is to create forums in which we can strategize ways to form organizations, mobilizations, and a broad set of movements capable of moving us toward a good society.

Too often, movements for social change have faltered over how to make time for both goals. Sometimes, movements lean too far toward the strategic side, favoring revolutionary action over collaborative education and consciousness-raising. At other times, movements lean too far toward the expressive side; we create great dignifying and sacred spaces in which to explore the details of everyday oppression. Meanwhile, the irrational society continues to thrive around the movement, unscathed by our efforts.

### ***3.7 How to create compassionate spaces for intra-group conflict?***

Social movements, then, are spaces in which individuals meet from both ends of innumerable social hierarchies. This meeting inevitably engenders emotions that no one wants to feel. Yet these often unwanted feelings enter the room each time we meet together to discuss societal change.

Feelings of envy, frustration, and guilt are unavoidable clouds that float through the tumultuous sky of every social movement. At times, these emotions can prove constructive and make for moments of learning. At other times, envy and guilt can become destructive, fragmenting us into a flock of discouraged and bewildered souls.

As we have seen throughout the Alter-Left, those with less relative privilege bring to the movement class or race-related envy and rage. When a movement member is struggling to find money to pay for food and shelter, it can be demoralizing to watch others chat merrily on their iPhones, complaining about sleeping on the floor of some relatively wealthy New Yorker who has taken them in.

And while those without relative privilege feel envy and rage, those with considerable power often feel guilty about their economic or racial status. This guilt can turn inward,

churning into immobilizing self-hatred. Or activists of relative privilege can turn their frustrations outward; they can express rage toward those they blame for making them feel guilty.

Power differences among movement members create tensions that we need to carefully understand and address. The more oppressed amongst us can throw up our hands and say, “this movement is going nowhere with all of these clueless rich folks running around.” The wealthy amongst us can throw up their hands too, saying “this movement is going nowhere with all of these oppressed movement-folk throwing blame around all the time.”

A sad reality: Activists with more relative privilege *can* afford to just walk away from movement when tired of feeling guilty or frustrated. We can return to our stimulating colleges, warm apartments, or well-paying jobs, feeling cynical about the impossibility of creating social change. Those amongst us without such options cannot always afford to walk away. For what we walk back to is the intolerable society that drove us toward the movements in the first place. Often, those with the most to lose become central to the success of any movement.

An even sadder reality: the social order benefits when we divide ourselves and are fooled into seeing each other as an enemy to be conquered. We divide and conquer ourselves when we vent our frustrations upon each other, feeling that it is more important to ‘win’ against others in the movement than it is to ‘win’ as a movement.

Within the Old Left, or within identity-related movements, leaders tried to downplay privilege differences between members. By creating a unified ‘worker’, ‘woman’, or ‘black power freedom fighter’, these movements tried to emphasize unity as a way to avoid addressing inequalities within their movements. Sometimes this approach worked, and sometimes it failed miserably.

‘Horizontal hostility’ emerges when those standing relatively close to one another on the power grid begin fighting against one another. Horizontal hostility arises within movements as

individuals look at each other, noting differences in relative privilege that lead to envy and frustration. In some cases, horizontal hostility leads to the demise of important movements. While the Feds and cops will do their best to undo us, we can support their efforts by aiming the fire-hose of our resentments toward each other.

In the women's movement, there were too many moments in which women divided and conquered their movements out of existence. Women of varying amounts of race, class, gender, and sexual privilege took each other on with a ferocity that should have been reserved for a target that really deserved it—the patriarchal system.

In too many instances, what could have been powerful and transformative organizations, events, and movements, dead-ended with intra-group hostility that ended in paralysis, burnout, and general disgruntlement. While we spent hours, days, and months refining our arguments and anger toward one another, the system we meant to bring down prospered around us.

### ***3.8 How to understand intra-group frustration: no such thing as reverse discrimination***

One thing we don't want to do is to confuse *situational domination* within our movements with instances of societal oppression. Women in a meeting might take momentary dominion over the floor, intimidating men to be silent. Yet the women in question are not *oppressing* men. Similarly, although individuals of color can take temporary control over a meeting by articulating frustration over in-group racial dynamics, that does not mean they can *oppress* people with white skin privilege.

Notions of 'reverse racism' or 'reverse sexism' are misleading, harmful, and conceal the real power dynamics that underlie societal oppression. Individuals or groups from oppressed groups cannot *oppress* those who enjoy more power and relative privilege in their everyday lives due to social rank. Situational instances of intra-movement domination between those with and

those with fewer societal opportunities are unfortunate, draining, and can even paralyze movements. Yet we should not confuse ourselves into seeing such instances as oppression.

### ***3.9 What to do with intra-group frustration and conflict?***

Activists are often confused about how to deal with conflicts related to power inequalities among individuals within movements. This awkwardness rears its head particularly when it comes to the process of group facilitation, or addressing power dynamics within the group.

For example, activists of relative privilege may feel uncomfortable facilitating meetings in which many members regarded as having less privilege. A white middle-class male facilitator might feel awkward when setting a time limit, for example, on a low-income woman of color. That awkwardness is a signal of power-in-the-room.

In some situations, it makes sense to err on the side of allowing people with less relative privilege to take up more space within discussions. Often, this is an expansive way to (minimally) address power imbalances amongst us. Sometimes, those with more relative privilege can afford to cede their desire to speak or act in order to provide more space for those with less opportunities to have their say. Distributing speaking lots is sometimes a useful strategy to encourage those less likely to feel entitled to speak in public space.

In addressing movement-related conflict, we have two challenges. First, individuals need to articulate movement-related frustrations. Yet we cannot afford to make general meetings *the primary forum* in which to do so. Second, we need to consider questions of authority that rise as we contemplate who has legitimacy to speak on particular issues or to play various roles within movements.

As for the first issue, movements may benefit by engendering multiple spaces designated for different kinds of movement work to be done. It is constructive to engage in some expressive

work within strategic meetings. Yet if we spend too much time expressing frustrations over intra-movement power dynamics in such forums, we leave ourselves with little time to plan important actions, discuss organizational philosophy and so on. We become paralyzed and ineffective as the powers-at-be around us continue to speedily work around us.

Once again, we need arenas in which we can engage in on-going education and consciousness-raising related to oppression and liberation. These learning opportunities help us to understand the relationship between conflicts within movements and societal oppression itself. We need study groups, anti-oppression work-shops, and ongoing movement schools in which we may teach one another about each other's personal and political histories and everyday lives. It is key that we regard *both* strategic meetings and educational spaces as central to the work we do together.

Second, we need to contemplate the question of authority that arises within meetings, group presentations, lectures and so on. In many movements, those of us with relative privilege enter meeting spaces feeling entitled to have our say. In response, those of us without relative privilege grow frustrated, rightfully feeling that our authority to speak on issues of importance is compromised. For instance, women may feel frustrated by men while people of color grow impatient with those with degrees of racialized privilege.

A regrettable, yet predictable scenario ensues as those of us with less power determine that those of us with more power lack the authority to speak on pressing movement-related matters. Well-intentioned individuals find ourselves asserting that as members of oppressed groups, we are *uniquely authorized to speak* with legitimacy about matters of concern.

This scenario plays itself out in meetings in nearly every social movement. So ridden with guilt and shame related to our own privilege, many of those among us that have more

relative privilege grow weary. Unused to being silenced or delegitimized, we may eventually become frustrated, finding that we want to leave the movement entirely.

Issues of authority related to our identities can be central to questions of identity politics. In the black power movement in the 1960s-1970s, activists believed African Americans to be the most legitimate authorities on revolution in the United States. So disgusted with the authoritative power waged by those with white skin privilege, many active within the movement felt the need to separate from whites as much as possible. Forming a vanguard of black activists, the black power movement created rich political culture and movement that inspired many other members of oppressed groups to create their own separatist movements.

Like those in Black Power movements, radical lesbian separatists often held that lesbians were *the* authorities on revolution. Worn-out by male oppression both within and outside of progressive movements, lesbian separatists sought to distance themselves emotionally, sexually, and physically from men whenever possible. Lesbian separatists formed a vanguard that brought to life a spectacular culture that gave rise to an array of creative projects and political mobilizations.

It is useful to reflect on separatist movements because they are heightened examples of the ways in which identity-politics can intersect with notions of authority. Separatist movements can be extremely beneficial. They provide critical spaces in which those sharing a set of particular marginalized identities can engage in consciousness-raising about a collective history and everyday experience. From this self-education can spring a fountain of empowerment and dynamic sub-culture that can give rise to unique forms of art, music, theory, and revolutionary vision.

Separatist spaces can also be valuable in allowing members of oppressed groups to cultivate a much-needed sense of *authority*. As members of oppressed groups meet together, we

witnessing our own intelligence, competence, and distinctive perspective on reality. This experience can prove critical as we begin to understand the unique contributions we can make to broader movements for social change.

Separatist spaces also allow members of oppressed groups to feel a sense of entitlement when speaking in ‘mixed’ forums that bring together activists with varying degrees of social privilege. Previously silenced due to a fear of lacking authority to speak intelligently on issues, those emerging from separatist spaces often feel ready and entitled to have their say.

Separatist spaces also give rise to esteemed political figures and writers who may then inspire other activists from oppressed groups. These activists may never have participated directly in separatist movements or spaces. But, from afar, they were still able to learn at the feet of such key separatists ranging from Malcolm X to Adrienne Rich. Many young activists today bring the authority gleaned from these movements into general meetings, making those meetings all the stronger, more diverse, and just.

Once again, a learning opportunity for us all emerges. How do we learn to respect the authority of movement-members of oppressed groups while also valorizing the authority of activists of relative privilege? Activists of privilege can be brimming with shame, guilt, and embarrassment regarding their societal status. Such individuals may feel stung when an activist from an oppressed group confronts them on their privilege, questioning their authority to speak on key movement matters.

There are no easy answers to questions about authority among activists possessing varying amounts of privilege. Yet there are a few things we can keep in mind when we find ourselves in situations where we see activists enter into conflict over determining who has the authority to speak.

First, any movement must begin with the assumption, that in good faith, all members of an organization or movement, have ‘signed onto’ a set of shared principles (as discussed previously). If a group or organization has a principles-based set of criteria for inclusion, then we can assume that activists of relative privilege actively embrace a set of shared values (such as direct democracy, moral economy, social justice, mutualism and ecology).

By sharing a set of movement or organizational principles, all members should be granted the authority to speak with authority within an organization—regardless of their degree of privilege. Framing movement-related authority in a principled way can defuse the frustrations many feel when questions of intra-group authority arise.

However, each group or organization should also have structural guidelines regarding how often and at what length *any* activists may speak in a collective setting. While activists of relative privilege included in groups may be granted the authority to speak on matters of importance, that doesn’t mean that they, or anyone, should be able to hold dominion over the floor.

During meetings, members of groups can politely intervene, suggesting that a process point needs to be considered. If a group member of relative privilege is becoming *authoritative* by indirectly coercing others to listen to their words for too long a time, then members of that group have a responsibility to intercede, making a request that the individual quickly bring their statement to conclusion.

It is key here to stay close to our values or principles, rather than to attack individuals based on their relative privilege. Anyone holding dominion over the floor is breaking with a principle of mutualism that holds all members of a group as having the right to speak in a meeting in a comradely and respectful way.

There are cases when it may prove difficult to stay close to our principles. For instance, if a young white woman attends a meeting composed primarily of older white men, she might feel uncomfortable voicing her opinion. She may also feel that the group's composition too closely mirrors the power-dynamic of the world outside the movement. At such times, she might feel moved to intervene, challenging the authority of the men in the room from speaking at all when there are so few women or people of color in the room.

In response, the white men in the room may soon feel embarrassed and guilty, noting their prominence in the space. They might be drawn into silence or they might lash out, expressing frustration with the young woman who has challenged their authority to speak on movement matters in a group composed mainly of white men.

What should we do in such a situation? Once again, the best we can do is rely on our principles of mutualism which require that we treat each other with respect.

If the white men in the room are not speaking in ways that violate our shared principles (making racist or classist claims, for example), then we need to respect their authority to speak. However, if we find that there is a *pattern of group composition*—an *ongoing structural problem of group constituency* that creates a meeting of mainly of white men, then we need to pose a few more questions. We need to evaluate the movement's efforts, successes, and failures at making itself more inclusive of a wider variety of people from different points of the power spectrum.

In addition to attending to matters of group composition, we need to pay attention to the content of our utterances in a group. If a group is speaking about the experiences of people of color or women in society, then it is only logical that people of color and women be granted more *situational authority* during that meeting to speak on the issue. If a group is speaking about how to make the movement more welcoming to queer or transgender activists, then again, it is

only logical that the group lend the floor to the authority of queer and transgender members of the group.

We may see such efforts as logical because members that have experienced particular forms of oppression can share what they have learned with the group. However, there are instances in which not all members of an oppressed group present in a meeting have yet raised their consciousness to a point where they feel that they have the authority to speak knowledgably on a given topic. Similarly, there are times when a member of an oppressed group simply doesn't want to speak on an issue. We should never tokenize movement members by expecting that individuals will speak on matters we assume they want to speak about.

It can be frustrating to find ourselves in meetings composed of too many members of relative privilege. Yet it can be destructive to any movement to silence activists of relative privilege simply because of their societal status.

Shaming or intimidating any group member into speechlessness is rarely good for a movement—unless that individual is violating a shared group principle. As discussed previously, anyone struggling to build a popular movement understands that we need activists from all nodes in the power network. We all bring crucial insights, energies, and resources to the group. It benefits all when we expect the best from each other rather than the worst. When and if possible, we need to give those of us with relative privilege the benefit of the doubt, assuming that we are in the movement for humanitarian and mutualistic reasons.

### ***3.10 Why does the right get it 'right?'***

Many in the Left wonder why the Right is often competent in organizing projects such as the anti-choice movement, the Republican party or the Tea Party. While their success is linked

to factors too numerous to explore here, we can consider a few issues that facilitate their abilities to work together in an efficient way.

First, unlike the Left, people drawn to the right generally don't expect to address power differences between members. Right-wing agendas are rarely explicitly anti-racist, anti-sexist, sex/gender positive and so on.

Members accept it as normal when they reproduce the same sexual and racial hierarchies within their movements that exist outside them. Right-leaning activists often seek out social movements looking for a sense of belonging. Finding acceptance and support for one's ideas is a gratifying feeling for many in the right. Sensing that one is part of a 'moral majority' can also give one a feeling of self-righteousness—especially when the movements' morals aren't tested within the movement itself. Generally speaking, right-wing leaders of organizations are held less accountable and are less accessible than those in Left-leaning organizations.

Those drawn to right-leaning projects tend to consent to a culture of hierarchy—be it based on sexual, racial, or other relative privilege. This consent is often based on a feeling that such hierarchies are natural, normal, and inevitable. When right-leaning groups do address questions of 'diversity', they don't define diversity in terms of power or inequality within and outside the movement. They often address 'diversity' and matters of intra-group inequality by placing a few token individuals in visible positions of relative authority.

Second, those who feel pulled toward right-leaning organizations are comfortable enough participating in hierarchically structured groups. As their members see hierarchy as unavoidable and constructive, they are often comfortable deferring their own opinions and ideas to the leaders of their movements. The culture, then, of right-leaning organizations is generally one of domination and passivity. Leaders are expected to direct while followers accept their decisions, seeing these decisions as expressing their own vision.

When groups are stratified and centralized, decision-making can be streamlined. When a groups' majority is excluded from key decision-making processes, policies can be determined more speedily by a just a few group leaders. Hierarchy and centralization of power saves tremendous amounts of time, energy, and resources, allowing group members to deftly and quickly carry out the vision of groups leaders.

It is worth considering these differences between right and left-leaning projects when thinking about the challenges faced by the Alter-Left. Too often, we are hard on ourselves. We blame ourselves and each other for being apathetic when we aren't part of a movement. And when we do find ourselves within a movement, we compare ourselves to those on the right, determining ourselves bungling failures when our efforts don't measure up.

The fact is that it's far more difficult to create and conduct movements that have high standards for how we conduct ourselves in regards to power. Hierarchy 'works' far easier than non-hierarchy just as a dictatorship of one is far more 'effective' than a complex direct-democracy of tens or hundreds.

The problem is that unless we want to give up the cause for social justice, we can't take the easier way out by becoming authoritarian, top-down, and unwilling to address intra-group conflict head on. If we want our movements to be prefigurative—embodying the same values we seek to incorporate into a new society—then we have to be patient with ourselves and each other, knowing that a just cause is worth fighting for in a just way.

---

THE FOLLOWING IS A SECTION THAT WILL BE INCLUDED IN THE BOOK IN PROGRESS. PLEASE READ IT AS IT ADDRESSES QUESTIONS OF ECONO-CENTRISM TO BE DISCUSSED DURING THE SEMINAR ON 'THE LEFT'.

## ***Beyond Econo-centrism: Toward a Citizen-Centered Democracy***

Due to the long-term after shocks of the cold war, few in the U.S. understand what capitalism is, where it came from, or how to replace capitalism with a *moral economy* (to be defined later). This lack of *Marxist-leftist literacy* surfaces as many in the Alter-Left struggle to grasp questions of power, class, labor, and capitalist domination.

Yet while drawing from the best of Marx, the Alter-Left must consider ways to transcend a problem of *econo-centrism* inherent to the theory. Econo-centrism is a philosophical and tactical worldview. First, it regards the primary identity and function of human beings in terms of labor and economics. Second, econo-centrism holds that human evolution (or revolution) hinges upon workers' abilities to eventually manage the economy in a democratic way.

At first glance, econo-centrism appears to be a redemptive way to see workers in a capitalist society. It valorizes workers by viewing their toil as virtuous and righteous rather than lowly and worthless. It also places the worker as the central figure in creating revolution.

Yet when we assume an econo-centric perspective, we confront two problems. First, we fail to see the full set of potentialities of human beings that go beyond realms of work. Second, we are unable to see how and why work came to be over-valorized within a Christian framework. We also fail to see how this over-valorization of work can be problematic. Finally, we are confused into thinking that by changing the economy of a society, we will create a directly democratic society.

### ***4.1 Econo-centrism and cultural evolution***

Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Marx developed his ideas, notions of cultural evolution had been popularized by science enthusiasts including Herbert Spencer and Lewis

Henry Morgan. These thinkers drew from Charles Darwin's work on natural evolution to understand how human culture 'evolves'.

At this time, those in power rationalized colonialism and slavery by claiming that 'primitive' peoples were not fully human. White men in power used *scientific racism* to make the subjugation of 'primitives' appear as moral. According to the Protestant Christian work ethic popular at the time, disciplined labor would have a civilizing effect on primitive peoples. Whites in power regarded it as the 'white man's burden' to civilize primitive man by putting him to work.

According to theories of cultural evolution, all human societies evolve according to a uniform and universal model of stages. After beginning in a state of savagery, humans become increasingly civilized over time, as their work-related technology 'evolves' from hunting and gathering, to agriculture, and finally to Western industrial capitalism.

From the colonial Christian perspective, the 'idleness' of savages was responsible for their uncivilized state. Christian colonialists dismissed the non-laborious activities of indigenous peoples, regarding fireside story telling, artisanal activity, and sexual rituals as immoral and animalistic.

According to cultural evolutionists like Marx, the division of labor becomes more refined over history. Human history is a stagial process, following an inevitable universal trajectory that always begins in savagery, moves onto barbarism, then to Feudalism, culminating in industrial capitalism.

For Marx, once a society turned agricultural, it was ready to be industrialized and workers would transform into a revolution-ready proletariat. According to this formula, the industrialized worker would be inherently anti-capitalist, and would thus overthrow the capitalist system, eventually leading to a truly civilized society of stateless socialism.

It is for this reason that Marxist revolutionaries such as Lenin, Stalin, or Mao Tse Tung, believed agrarian societies in Eastern Europe and Asia must be rapidly industrialized. Once industrialized, these countries would produce class-conscious revolutionary workers ready to govern themselves through a dictatorship of the proletariat.

#### ***4.2 Labor as virtuous or just miserable?***

Prior to modern Christianity, within and outside of the Colonial world, onerous labor was simply understood as burdensome. Spending most of one's time by working was considered the unlucky fate of slaves or serfs obliged to work for a village head-man, a master, a king or an aristocrat. In societies such as hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, or horticulturalists, people spent a relatively short amount of their time (and at key times of the year) engaged in arduous labor.

But during the colonial era, Christian emissaries engendered notions of how 'tilling the land' through agriculture had elevated civilized man over his savage predecessors, setting him on the road toward more sophisticated and godly pursuits.

It is not surprising that this colonial narrative carried itself into the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bretton Woods schemes. Looking at the impoverished in the former colonies, Bretton Woods agents are still, today, determined to make those in the global South 'productive'. The idea of 'development' euphemistically replaced the idea of 'civilization' as Westerners try to instill in inhabitants of former colonies with an industrial capitalist work ethic.

The idea of work as civilizing and virtuous has two sets of distinct, yet related meanings. On the one hand, the view that work is civilizing emerges from a legacy of Western scientific racism, colonialism, and slavery. By putting primitives or savages to work, white men in power saw themselves as playing god, helping set those less evolved on the road to civilization.

On the other hand, the idea of work as virtuous is imbued with a different set of meanings. As Max Weber points out, the Protestant work ethic provides a way for individuals to demonstrate their spiritual status by performing ceaseless acts of toil. The more an individual works, the more one proves to others that they have indeed been ‘called’ by god to enter heaven. Only the virtuous can enter the gates of heaven, and only those who suffer toil on this earth by hard work are seen by god as virtuous.

This idea of work-as-virtuous fits neatly into the Christian idea that those who suffer from a life of hard work shall benefit in the after-life to come. This notion, that the meek (such as slaves or slave-wagers) shall inherit the Earth, is central to Christian narratives about human suffering.

In the Christian narrative, humanity’s purpose in this life is to live by an ethic of self-sacrifice and hard work. In doing so, humanity overcomes its sinful, sensual, and self-indulgent inclination.

It is a peculiar historical irony that Maoist China became culturally absorbed in a Christian work ethic when it followed Marxist schema of communism. In Maoist China, farm-workers selflessly slogged away in the fields, suffering miserably to demonstrate their worth as revolutionaries.

When leaders in Maoist China determined an individual to be enjoying themselves too much by engaging in arts, dance, sensual, or sexual activity—at the expense of work—they were often punished and stigmatized. This view of leisure-as-idleness traces itself back to a Christian narrative which valorizes selflessness, martyr-like behavior, and a ruthless work ethic.

When Marx reproduced the work ethic in his writings he unknowingly signed on to what the philosopher Nietzsche called a ‘transvaluation of values’. According to Nietzsche, Christianity regarded the exploited as righteous sufferers who paradoxically will triumph in the

after life. Nietzsche called the valorization of workers or the poor as a kind of ‘slave morality’. He saw how slave morality was a way for people in powerless situations to cope with their unjust predicament. The problem with slave morality, according to Nietzsche, is that we end up celebrating suffering, toil, labor—instead of seeing it for what it really is: oppression and precious time wasted.

### **4.3 *Zoon politikon* vs. *Zoon ergon***

The ancient Greeks had a very different understanding of the ‘nature’ or purpose of humanity. For Aristotle, humanity’s *telos*, or ‘end’ is to become a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. By refining social organization, rather than work, humanity could fulfill its unique potential to become truly conscious, relational, and ultimately, democratic.

For the ancient Greeks, living in a kinship based society and fulfilling biological needs in the private sphere was central to keeping humanity alive. But to really thrive, humanity had to be free enough from everyday labors to be able to participate in political life.

So a question remains; Is humanity a working animal, a *zoon ergon*? Or are we a political animal, a *zoon politicon*?

In his work, *Politics*, Aristotle writes, “Every city is a kind of association, and every association is joined together for the sake of some good (...) rules of justice are the organizing principle of political association.” It is key here that Aristotle uses the term city, or *polis*, rather than the word, *state*. Aristotle, and those who literally rejoiced in political life, saw the *polis*, or city, as a site of voluntary association rather than an authoritarian and hierarchical agglomeration that constituted ancient states (such as those in the Near-East, Greece, and Rome and Meso-America).

The ancient Athenians regarded such state formations as brutal and uncivilized, reducing most of its denizens to work animals, slaves or serfs. For the ancient Greeks, to be forced to work to serve a master, was seen as inherently dehumanizing. It is only through voluntary association and participation in self-governance, that we find our humanity.

The Greek understanding of *politics* required time for developing oneself to be *knowledgeable* about the art of principled political debate. In turn, direct democracy required *time* to participate in general assemblies as well as other meetings in which citizens discussed and determined public policies that governed everyday life. One gained virtue by being seen as a good citizen, someone who participated actively and ethically within a citizen's assembly.

What was also distinctive among the ancient Athenians was the idea that people could come together to create a civil society. Civil society is one in which social ties are not based on blood-line, heredity, or some form of kinship such as relation-by-marriage. Unique was the idea that people—any people, kin or not—could potentially join a community and become a member of a society joined by political ties.

This shift from ties based on kinship to ties based on citizenship is central. This transition from kinship-based ties to relations based on notions of citizenship certainly did not put an end kinship; people still lived, as they do today, in couples, families, and so on. What was new among the Athenians was the idea that membership within a society could be based on citizenship rather than kinship bonds based on blood or marriage.

Once we see humans in terms of social organization—rather than in terms of work—the social project changes dramatically. No longer is the worker itself a virtuous category. The seat of power is no longer the workers' council, coop, or union. When we see humans in relational terms, *zoon politikon* emerges; humans, as social animals come to life as nature rendered self-

conscious. We become primates capable of coming together through voluntary association to govern ourselves.

#### ***4.4 De-centering work in the Leftist tradition: A Copernican revolution?***

In the 1500s, Renaissance astronomer Copernicus proved that the earth was not the center of the universe. In so doing, he toppled the Christian heliotropic map of the cosmos that put humans (made in god's image) at the center of all. The Copernican break-through played a role in opening the door to a scientific and industrial revolution. No longer tethered to a heliotropic paradigm, scientists could think more creatively about astronomy, physics, and science generally.

When theorists are bound to a faulty thesis, their explanations will become increasingly convoluted as they try to fit new findings into an outdated model of reality. Leading up to the Copernican revolution, theories about the universe's structure indeed became incrementally befuddled as scientists tried to merge new findings in astronomy with the Christian model. Once released from the Christian view of the cosmos, they were able to see the universe in important new ways.

Just as the Copernican Revolution opened the door for a new way of seeing reality, the Alter-Left is cracking the door as well. Instead of knocking the Earth out of the center of the universe (where it never was), the Alter-Left must displace 'work' from its central position in notions of what it means to be human.

What stands in the way of displacing 'work' as the center of human existence? An unconscious alliance with Christian understandings of work-as-virtuous.

Anarchists have generally presented a work ethos quite different from Marx. Few anarchists regard work as a virtuous engine of history that leads them to revolutionary ends.

Instead, they generally see work as a necessary set of tasks that should be approached in a democratic way, so as not to burden any individual with toilsome or onerous labor.

Proudhon, for example, believed that work tasks should be chosen by free association. Less enjoyable tasks, such as sanitation, should be rotated so that everyone in a community has a first-hand appreciation of what is required to execute low-satisfaction chores. Job rotation is a democratic approach to work, distributing both burdensome and gratifying assignments throughout the community.

Work that requires detailed training and specialization, such as medicine or engineering, would not lend themselves as readily to job rotation. These endeavors could be attained also by processes of free association in which those drawn to these occupations could be required to commit to a long-term educational process. But those with more specialized work would not be granted higher material or political status in a moral economy.

Decision-making authority and work-related rules related to a line of work could be granted to individuals intimately engaged day-to-day in performing certain tasks. They would thus be granted autonomy in determining their workspace, protocols, and structure. But that authority would be limited in that the general assembly would oversee the broad-spectrum features of particular work spaces, making sure that community members abide by the community's set of ethical principles.

Unlike Marxists, anarchists generally regard leisure as a sensual, creative, and intellectual mainstay of life. In a post-scarcity society, citizens would have free time to pursue both personal and political endeavors. Emma Goldman is often remembered as an anarchist who distinguished herself from her communist and socialist work-minded comrades. Foregoing the work ethic embedded within their world-view, Goldman is often imagined as literally leaving a political party meeting to join a fanciful and joyous social party.

The saying, ‘If I can’t dance to it, it’s not my revolution’, doesn’t come from the exact words of Goldman. Yet its message rings true to her spirit. She understood implicitly that life is at least partly about expanding horizons of pleasure, desire, and personal development. She saw this world-view as completely compatible with an understanding of life that made her work year after year as a revolutionary.

Similarly, if those in the Alter-Left can finally break with the econo-centric view of the world, a similar set of potentialities come into place as well. What stands in the way of a world view that sees social organization, rather than work, as the defining feature of humanity? A centuries-old Christian narrative that sees work as a virtuous and civilizing engine of history.

#### ***4.5 Letting go of econo-centrism: trivializing class and workers?***

Many fear letting go of econo-centrism. Some are concerned that ceasing to see work and workers as virtuous is an affront to the working class all over the world—particularly the newly proletarianized in the global South. Marx’s revalorization of the poor industrial worker resonates with many in the Alter-Left who still maintain a view that the ‘down trodden should inherit the Earth’. Many feel that shifting our focus from worker to citizen is an insult to those who have suffered at the hands of the bourgeoisie, or what we call today, the 1%.

TO BE CONTINUED.....

