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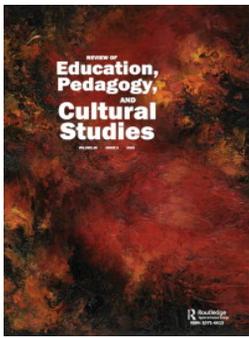
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Ah Bartleby! Study, learning, and pedagogy in Occupy Wall Street

Darren Webb

ABSTRACT

On October 26, 2011, a post appeared on the Occupy Wall Street Library blog titled “I would prefer not to.” The constant refrain of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* became one of Occupy’s defining mottos, appearing on placards, T-shirts, and tote bags. The phrase became so symbolic that it was used on the posters promoting the general strike called for May 2012. Bartleby’s mode of passive resistance has been theorized extensively. His appropriation by OWS has been the source of much theorizing too. What I want to do in this paper is use Bartleby as a useful analogy for exploring the educational logic of Occupy Wall Street. While some read a dangerous and threatening “Bartlebyan inscrutability” into OWS’s various refusals (the refusal to issue demands, to address questions of political ontology, to specify conditions of success), I argue instead that the performativity of Bartleby’s refusal helps cast light on the need for pedagogical intervention in moments and movements of utopian rupture. The very indeterminacy of study as a mode of educational being within OWS—of “preferring not to” actualize potential, adopt a political subjectivity, elucidate any determinate ends—created a vacuum that precluded the movement from learning from itself. The oscillating state of permanent suspension, in which the utopian possibilities contained within the movement were held im-potential, led to paralysis and neglect. In contrast to the “weak” utopianism ascribed to OWS by Tyson Lewis, I conclude the paper by calling for a “strong” utopianism conceived as a collective endeavor and iterative process but one within which pedagogical organization plays a crucial facilitating role.

KEYWORDS

Occupy Wall Street; prefigurative politics; communist study; utopia; critical pedagogy; social movement learning

Introduction

Lawyer: *Why do you refuse?*

Bartleby: *I would prefer not to* (Melville, 2016, p. 14).

On October 26, 2011, a post appeared on the Occupy Wall Street Library blog titled “I would prefer not to.” This, of course, was the infamous refrain of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), who soon became the movement’s “unofficial mascot” and “patron saint” (Poore,

2011; Martyris, 2011). There were two public readings of Melville's short story and many of the occupiers wore T-shirts and carried bags printed with Bartleby's intransigent words of refusal (Hardesty, 2011; Yin, 2011). The phrase became so symbolic that it was used on the posters promoting the general strike called for May 2012. Bartleby's mode of passive resistance has been theorized extensively—by Agamben, Deleuze, Derrida, Hardt and Negri, Rancière, and Žižek among others. His appropriation by Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has been the source of much theorizing too. What I want to do in this paper, to mark and reflect on its tenth anniversary, is use Bartleby as a fruitful analogy for exploring the educational logic of Occupy Wall Street.

One of the notable features of OWS was the emphasis placed by participants and commentators alike on its educational dimensions. Time and again one finds Occupy referred to as a site or space of “learning” (e.g., Chomsky, 2012; Gitlin, 2012; Jaffe, 2012; Rowe & Carroll, 2015; Stronzake, 2012; Yassin, 2012). Neary and Amsler remarked at the time that “the Occupy movement is explicitly pedagogical... it is certain that the movement educates” (2012, pp. 111–112). A special issue of *Radical Teacher* opened by declaring that “Occupy has been a pedagogical movement... a site of educational ferment and experimentation... Occupy understood from its inception that knowledge production and learning are central to social and political struggle” (Entin et al., 2013, p. 2). Within these assessments, one finds various terms at play (*education, learning, pedagogy*) that are often conflated. Added to these is the notion of *study* that Tyson Lewis (2013, 2014) uses to characterize the state of education within OWS. There is more at stake in this play of terms than mere semantic distinction. Debates concerning the role of study, learning, and pedagogy within social movements open onto broader questions of strategy, organization, and power. It is these questions that the paper seeks to explore.

While some read a dangerous and threatening “Bartlebyan inscrutability” into OWS's various refusals (the refusal to issue demands, to address questions of political ontology, to specify conditions of success), I argue instead that the performativity of Bartleby's refusal helps cast light on the need for pedagogical intervention in moments and movements of utopian rupture. The very indeterminacy of study as a mode of educational being within OWS—of “preferring not to” actualize potential, adopt a political subjectivity, elucidate any determinate ends—created a vacuum that precluded the movement from learning from itself. The paper explores examples of this in relation to two key features of the educational logic of OWS (prefiguration and constituent rupture) and argues that the oscillating state of permanent suspension, in which the utopian possibilities contained within the movement were held im-potential, led to paralysis and neglect. In contrast to the “weak”

utopianism ascribed to OWS by Lewis, I conclude the paper by calling for a “strong” utopianism conceived as a collective endeavor and iterative process but one within which pedagogical organization plays a crucial facilitating role.

Turning tongues and heads

I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks (Melville, 2016, p. 26).

On one level, the educational logic of OWS operated in a very conventional and didactic sense, through various tactics of awareness-raising and persuasion. This was “critical public pedagogy” (Roberts & Steiner, 2010) as the transmission of slogans, signs, messages, memes, documents, and broadcasts. In *Translating Anarchy*, Mark Bray offers a detailed insider’s account of how the media team framed their outward-facing communications. Through its website, journals, Twitter feed, Tumblr account, and the Press Working Group’s engagement with the media, OWS “presented a highly rare opportunity to broadcast radical politics across the world... an opportunity to plant a few anti-authoritarian seeds for the future” (Bray, 2013, p. 122).

Parallels have been drawn between the discursive seeds planted by OWS and the contagious effect of *Bartleby’s* repeated insistence that he prefers not to. As *Bartleby’s* words seep involuntarily into the everyday language used by those around him, this “verbal contagion” (Edelman, 2013, p. 111) transformed the discourse of those seeking to understand and engage with *Bartleby’s* protest (McArdle, 2011). Indeed, for Lauren Klein “this is what we can learn from *Bartleby*: the significance of impacting a society’s everyday language... that introducing new language into conversation—even with inscrutable intentions—leaves its mark on tongues, minds and hearts” (Klein, 2011). The new language introduced by OWS was *We are the 99%*, a slogan that became “an iconic political symbol” considered by many to be the principal achievement of the movement (Bray, 2013, p. 155). Virtually every account of OWS, sympathetic or critical, includes some version of the claim that *We are the 99%* helped transform the terrain of American politics and, through a process of discursive contagion, turned tongues, shifting the focus from austerity to inequality and placing class politics firmly on the table (e.g., Chomsky, 2012, pp. 70–71; Disalvo, 2015, pp. 265–266; Gitlin, 2012, pp. 47–50; Graeber, 2013, p. 141; Grusin, 2011; Hammond, 2015, p. 310; Hayduk, 2013, p. 234; Milkman et al., 2013, 2014; Rowe & Carroll, 2015, pp. 145–146; Ruggiero, 2012, pp. 9–10; Singsen, 2012; van Gelder, 2011, p. 11).

Like *Bartleby*, OWS turned heads too. Summarizing its political appeal, Bojesen and Allen argue that for some the story “suggests that peaceful

refusal can indeed draw power out from the shadows and force it to reveal itself where it would like to appear most benign” (2019, p. 63). Just as power revealed itself in *Bartleby*’s eventual incarceration, so too heads were turned toward the police during 2011–2012 as they revealed themselves as “the army of the 1%” (Bray, 2013, p. 160). Indeed, the daily reality of police brutality is what many of the more reformist participants took away with them as their enduring memory of OWS (Flank, 2011, p. 241; Singsen, 2012; Taylor, 2011, p. 144; Writers for the 99%, 2011, p. 169). Some highlight an educational function in operation here as the experience of OWS, like the story of *Bartleby*, showed “how a *refusal* can open up new ways of seeing” (Hardesty, 2011), offering “windows of possibility” that help reorient “the cognitive maps through which we make sense of our being in community” (Arditi, 2012, pp. 10–11).

In the manner and extent to which it turned popular tongues and heads, it has been suggested that OWS enjoys an educational “afterlife” that stretches far beyond the events of 2011–2012 and remains with us still as a “spectral remainder” (Arditi, 2012, p. 10). For Lewis, noting the existence of such a remainder is all one can do. Precisely because it was a moment of public and collective *study*, no lessons or principles guiding future occupations can be drawn from OWS. We can note “the imprint that study as a collective and public event has left on the contemporary landscape,” trace its “spectral imprints ... remnants of the practices of study that haunt hallways, parks, classrooms, and campuses,” but nothing more (Lewis, 2013, p. 164). Is it really the case, though, that OWS “cannot be submitted to evaluation,” that all we can do is “bear witness to its peculiar and perplexing appearance” (Lewis, 2013, p. 52)? I argue otherwise. First, however, the concept of study—and its relation to learning and pedagogy—needs further elaboration.

Disarming inscrutability

Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable (Melville, 2016, p. 4)

The Occupy movement heralded *Bartleby* as a Wall Street worker who refused the dehumanization of corporate capitalism, occupied a space, steadfastly said No, and refused to issue demands or engage with figures of power. Castronovo notes: “As a patron saint for saying ‘no’ to Wall Street, *Bartleby* sanctifies a movement whose refusal to enumerate a set of goals and principles expressed a contemporary politics of negation” (2014, p. 259). Just as *Bartleby* “stunned,” “disarmed” and “disconcerted” his Wall Street employer with his “inscrutable” insistence that “I would prefer not to” (Melville, 2016, pp. 13–14, 31), so too Occupy’s refusal to issue a set of

demands exasperated those trying to make sense of the movement (Asher, 2013; Brown & Halberstam, 2011; Gersen, 2011; Happe, 2015; Shulman, 2011). For both Deleuze (1993, pp. 68–90) and Derrida (2008, pp. 75–76), Bartleby’s refusal exists beyond intelligibility and human comprehension, and it has been argued that precisely this—“the unintelligibility of Occupy”—was “what made it dangerous” (Duda, 2012, p. 280). Indeed, “the blank Bartlebyan inscrutability of Occupy Wall Street came to constitute its greatest power” (Greenberg, 2012).

For Lewis, this blank Bartlebyan inscrutability is a defining characteristic of *study* as “an im-potential state of educational being” (Backer et al., 2016, p. 422). This is contrasted with *learning* which, Lewis tells us, is “the educational logic of biocapitalism” (2013, p. 3). Lewis defines the experience of learning as “(a) identifying a specific potentiality for something and (b) actualizing that potentiality through learning in order to (c) meet some specific conditions of success” (2014, p. 113). The logic of learning is the logic of quantification, measurement, and assessment which reduces learners to impersonal data points and—crucially—destroys potentiality in its very fulfillment in the name of efficiency and effectiveness (Lewis, 2013, pp. 6–7). To *study*, on the other hand, is to *refuse* the command to actualize one’s potential, to *refuse* to have one’s creative energies harnessed and controlled in accordance with the sovereign logic of the market (2013, p. 5). To study is to remain im-potential, to hold together in a single gesture the potentiality to be and impotentiality not to be, preferring *not* to actualize one’s potential in any specific form but preferring instead to remain in a state of suspension between “I can/cannot,” embracing “the freedom of im-potentiality as an ontological opening to new possibilities” (2013, p. 45).

Lewis takes his notion of study from Agamben and Agamben attaches significance to Bartleby as “the most exemplary embodiment of study in our culture” (Agamben, 1995, p. 65). Bartleby dwells “in the abyss of potentiality” without having “the slightest intention of leaving it” (Agamben, 1998, p. 254), holding all possibilities within himself in suspended animation while withdrawing from the logic of actualizing any of them. For Lewis, study presents “a radical alternative to the educational logic of biocapitalism” (2013, p. 15) and Bartleby offers a “radically passive” mode of resistanceless resistance as he becomes “radically inoperative” in his choice to live “an educational life of ease without any desire for mastery” (pp. 47–49). What is radical about Bartleby’s preferring not to is the way in which its affectless expression possesses “a powerless power” that succeeds in interrupting the law and rendering his employer defenseless in the face of its disarming politeness (p. 48). This is the blank Bartlebyan inscrutability that Lewis, like others, reads positively as one of the most threatening aspects of the Occupy movement.

The first phase of OWS—the occupation of Zuccotti Park—is referred to by Lewis as a manifestation of a public, collective, communist study (2013, p. 150). Characterized by “a radical indeterminacy” (p. 44) that resists concretization and evades a definiteness that can be judged and assessed, Occupy embodied “the im-potential politics of study” (p. 150). Two particular refusals are highlighted by Lewis: the refusal to issue demands and “a radical refusal of the call to be this or that type of political subject” (p. 149). The former “was threatening (as well as confusing) not because of a specific or exact demand but precisely because it destabilized the ontology of political thinking and acting through the enigma of preferring not to make demands” (p. 154). The latter, finding expression in *We are the 99%*, resisted identity based on class, gender, race or any particular political subjectification and constituted instead “a radical *declassification* of all subject positions” (p. 157). OWS existed in a state of suspension, choosing to dwell in the oscillating rhythm of study with its radical openness to listening and thinking without a set goal and embracing a chaotic ontology lacking any determinate identity. OWS thus resisted the logic of learning, refusing to actualize its potentiality as a particular political subject seeking to meet specific conditions of success.

Occupy, for Lewis, was also a movement that eschewed pedagogical direction. Following Leach and Moon (2008, p. 6), we might define pedagogy as “a dynamic process informed by theories, beliefs, and dialogue, but only realized in the daily interactions of learners and teachers in real settings.” Pedagogy is thus a series of interactions in and through which learning—as the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, awareness, skills, etc.—takes place. One crucial feature of relevance here is that while “learning does not wait for teachers ... pedagogy always already assumes the intentionality of a pedagogue” (Roberts & Steiner, 2010, p. 25). Study, however, is the terrain of the autodidact and collective study is a self-generating and self-sustaining process (Lewis, 2013, p. 164). To the extent that a pedagogue is involved in this process, it is merely as “a kind of impotent assistant” who offers the time and space for studiers to study “without determinate ends, without identifiable interests,” thus leaving them “open, exposed, and attentive to the world” (2013, pp. 164, 13).

While Lewis has been criticized for his narrow and restrictive understanding of “learning” (Backer et al., 2016; Bojesen, 2017), I agree with his descriptive assessment of OWS as a manifestation of collective public study (which we might understand as a particular *mode* of learning) and his turn to *Bartleby* as a useful analogy. I disagree, however, with his celebratory account of both *Bartleby*’s resistance and its collective political expression in the occupation of Zuccotti Park. Rather, the experience of OWS illustrates the inadequacy (and dare I say, ineffectiveness) of study as a

disorganized and indeterminate mode of social movement learning. In what follows I outline two key features of the alternative educational logic of OWS (prefiguration and constituent rupture). I then point to the inadequacies of study as a (dis)organizing educational state of being before arguing, finally, that what the blank Bartlebyan inscrutability of OWS demonstrates is, in fact, the need for pedagogical direction.

I am occupied

Bartleby: *Not yet; I am occupied* (Melville, 2016, p. 30).

Viewed through the lens of the learning society, one who studies appears inactive, distracted, indifferent, and disengaged (Ford, 2016, p. 53; Lewis, 2013, p. 52). This appearance, however, belies the reality of study—of preferring not to—as an interminable rhythmic *activity*, a suspended state of oscillation between moving toward and withdrawing from certain ends, between passivity and urgency, subjectification and desubjectification (Ford, 2016, p. 56; Lewis, 2013, p. 12). Likewise, the refusals of OWS—to issue demands, to claim a determinate identity, to specify conditions of success—were expressive, not of indecision, but of collective study as an educational practice beating to the rhythm of an alternative educational logic. Key to this alternative educational logic was prefiguration, which grounded “a generative, iterative and educative process” of dialogic interaction (Amsler, 2015, p. 81).

Prefigurative politics seeks to create, within a movement itself, social relations and forms of life that embody the kind of society movement actors wish to create (Hammond, 2015; Yates, 2015). For Occupy activists and participants, these forms of life included solidarity, mutual aid, free association, cooperation, community, autonomy, horizontalism, empathy, empowerment, dignity, love, respect, and care (Bates et al., 2016; Bray, 2013; Flank, 2011; Hayduk, 2013; Suzahn, 2011). Regarding its educational logic, “a prefigurative approach ... mirrors the new world we want to build through our actions in the here and now. This acts as a school of struggle, with participants learning as they go and becoming aware of their own power” (South London Solidarity Federation, 2012, p. 194). This is the autodidactic and self-generating process referred to by Lewis, “a moment of self-education” through struggle (Campagna & Campiglio, 2012, p. 5). By coming together and acting here and now, participants gain confidence in the scope for collective human action and the capacity of human beings to enact new forms of life, this growing confidence in turn deepening the yearning for a different way of being, feeding the radical imagination, extending the bounds of what is considered possible and extending, in turn, the range of new forms of life that can be lived and experienced in the here and now (Graeber, 2013; Haiven, 2014; Sitrin, 2011b; Solnit, 2016; van Gelder, 2011).

Ruth Kinna characterizes the educational experience of OWS as a kind of anti-utopian utopianism (2016, p. 210). This captures well the suspended state in which transformed subjectivities were held within the oscillating rhythm of study. On the one hand, utopian claims were made concerning the forging of “new” reconfigured social relations (Graeber, 2012; Haiven, 2014; Kinna, 2016; Risager, 2017; Sitrin & Azzelini, 2014; Szolucha, 2015). Happe, for example, argues that Occupy offered “the experience of *egalitarian* social relations” (2015, p. 221). Hammond suggests that “by modeling the *desired* social relations,” OWS “attempted to create *extraordinary* social relations” (2015, pp. 298, 309). Bray adds that Occupy sought “the elimination of all *hierarchical* social relations” and the enacting of “*revolutionary*” social relations (2013, p. 39, p. 45). A process of *resubjectification* is said to have taken place at Zuccotti Park as new, radical subjectivities emerged in and through movement participation (Harrison, 2016, p. 496; Neary & Amsler, 2012; Sitrin, 2012; Sitrin & Azzelini, 2014, pp. 7–9).

On the other hand, however, there was an insistent rejection of utopian visions, designs, plans, and blueprints in the name of immanent praxis as an ongoing and endless process (Chrostowska, 2016, p. 306; Graeber, 2013, pp. 281–282; Lewis, 2013, p. 162; Schrager Lang et al., 2012, p. 25). Accompanying the proclamation of new revolutionary social relations was a refusal of the totalizing closure associated with utopian visions; a refusal to specify in advance the contours of the new world the movement was building and a commitment “to remain open to the experience of possibility as such” (Lewis, 2013, p. 45). OWS was able to hold “to be/not to be” in an oscillating state of suspension because the occupation was both the *terrain* and the *objective* of struggle. The space of occupation was where prefigurative politics as a “utopian” educational practice was situated—the process of “radical conjoining” (Lawler, 2011), of “bodies in alliance” (Butler, 2011), of staying put and growing roots (Klein, 2011) is what enabled putatively new social relations to emerge, develop, and deepen (Fithian, 2012; Marazzi, 2012; Premo, 2012; Risager, 2017). At the same time, however, the occupation had no utopian goal beyond itself and the choice made by participant-studiers to experiment *within* a suspended state of being (Lewis, 2013, p. 150). This then leads to a second aspect of the educational logic of OWS, constituent rupture.

Leave us alone

Bartleby: *I would prefer to be left alone here* (Melville, 2016, p. 26).

In the beginning is the scream, the scream of refusal, the scream against oppression, a furious No screamed against present inhumanity (Holloway,

2010a). We scream No so loud that cracks begin to form in the world as it is, and the cracks become ruptures, moments in which relations of domination are broken and other relations created (Holloway, 2010b). The language of many Occupy activists resonated with Holloway's. It was a widely shared belief that OWS constituted a No of absolute refusal, a "crack" in the domination of capital, and a "rupture" in the symbolic structures of neoliberal hegemony (Christie, 2011; Dean, 2012; Gitlin, 2012; Happe, 2015; Rira, 2011; Ruggiero, 2012, Sitrin, 2011b; Szolucha, 2015; van Gelder, 2011). For Holloway, of course, the No of negation is necessary but not sufficient. A rupture needs to become "a movement of refusal-*and*-other-creation," a process of "negation-*and*-creation" (2010b, pp. 6, 18), and what I want to focus on here is how OWS's creative force was understood within the movement.

Holloway himself stressed the power of pure negativity, the creative force of the No finding expression through "a grammar of negativity... understood as a deeper No, a negation of the negation which is not positive but more negative than the original negation" (2010a, p. 218). Running through Holloway's negative dialectics, however, is the positive subjectivity he variously terms "the drive toward self-determination," "the social flow of doing" or "power-to-do," a subjectivity that currently exists as an "overflowing" (2010a, pp. 6, 152, 219) which needs to be "emancipated" and "liberated" (2010a, pp. 36, 208). For Holloway: "Our power is power-to-do, but it is refusal that unblocks it" (2005, p. 267). One hears echoes of this among key movement activists such as Yotam Marom when he says of OWS's refusal that "Something has been opened up, a kind of space nobody knew existed. Something's just got kind of unclogged" (Gitlin, 2012, p. 4).

Negri interprets the creative force of oppositional struggle slightly differently. For him (and Hardt), the constituent power of the multitude—the revolutionary assembly of subjectivities that refuses the determinations of identity and of which OWS was deemed expressive—is not merely prefigurative of a new society but also productive of new subjectivities (De Lissovoy & Armonda, 2022; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Negri, 1999). The cooperative, creative, cognitive, networked, self-organizing, entrepreneurial, and affective dimensions of immaterial labor (Negri, 1996; Hardt & Negri, 2004) have generated "an ontological accumulation of counter-power" that makes "constituent rupture" possible (Negri, 2010, pp. 158, 161). Unlike Holloway, the rupture is read here in substantively positive terms (Negri, 2013). The *potentia* of the multitude increasingly exceeds the capacity of capital to control and subsume it, producing a "subjective excess" and "revolutionary surplus" that is carried forward as constituent power into the spaces created by rupture (Negri, 2010, p. 161).

Holloway and Negri each distance themselves from teleology. If a rupture is to liberate the social flow of doing, if a refusal is to possess constituent power, then continuous work, struggle, and organization are required. While “the positive content of communism” is already present in the composition of immaterial labor (Hardt, 2010, p. 141), we still need “a political project to bring it into being” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 221). While “out of our negation grows a creation,” this still requires “a politics that projects as it refuses” (Holloway, 2010b, pp. 3, 154). For many, OWS was such a project and such a politics. Or rather, the facticity of the occupation itself constituted such a project and such a politics. The emphasis of movement actors was placed firmly on the suggestion that the occupation had in and of itself created an opening, a puncture hole through which new subjectivities had been liberated and untapped human becomings had been freed (Grusin, 2011; Marom, 2012a, 2012b; Premo, 2012; Suzahn, 2011).

There was a collective sense within OWS that Zuccotti Park, by virtue of its very existence as a rupture, was always already an autonomous zone free from the domination of capital and a site for forms of other-doing and emancipatory ways of being (Gitlin, 2012; Graeber, 2011, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Kang, 2013; Milkman et al., 2013; Sitrin, 2012). This is by no means to underestimate the continuous hard work, struggle, and organization required to sustain the occupation for two whole months in the face of state repression. It is, however, to point to those accounts highlighting the “self-congratulatory” narratives circulating within the park and “the dogmatic belief that by collectively coming together we have already won” (Ciccariella-Maher, 2012, p. 39). Underpinning collective study as an organizational strategy—as meeting, talking, debating, and active listening within a state of ontological suspension, deliberately evading determinate questions of political subjectivity—was the sense that, as one core activist put it, “we are already free and we do not need to demand anything from anyone to realize our own liberation” (Writers for the 99%, 2011, p. 89). Because the occupiers were already free—having opened a crack through which transformed subjectivities had been liberated—like Bartleby their “only demand” became “leave us alone” (Sitrin, 2011a, p. 30, 2011b, p. 9). If left alone, free bodies gathered together in the space opened by the Scream would live and enact transformed social relations and real democracy (Sitrin, 2012). To “create spaces entirely outside the system’s control... this is just a matter of asking the state to leave us alone” (Graeber, 2013, p. 237).

Serious educational significance was attached to bodies being left alone to gather. Standing together as a We, amid a rupture, an opening through which new subjectivities had been liberated and untapped human becomings had been freed, was the key to forging transformed revolutionary

social relations. A feeling permeated the park that the bodies in an alliance formed “a chorus,” a “universal movement” transcending divisions of class, race, gender, and sexual identity (Christie, 2011). It thus became a manifestation of what Lewis terms “weak utopianism,” a form of utopianism that resists representation “in order to live within the im-potentiality of present possibilities” (2013, p. 95). OWS had ruptured the space-time of capitalism and released the utopian potentiality (the overflowing surplus or excess) inscribed within the constituent *bios* of the multitude. Resisting both the architectural (concrete demands) and ontological (determinate subjectivity) dimensions of “strong utopianism” (see Levitas, 2013), OWS engaged in suspended prefigurative experiments aimed at “the de-completion of the present in the name of educational im-potentiality” (Lewis, 2013, p. 96).

No change at all

Bartleby: *No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all* (Melville, 2016, p. 38).

The myriad interviews, ethnographic studies, and first-hand accounts of OWS point to the ways in which power, exclusion, hierarchy, silencing, and marginalization operated within the movement. Rather than “transformed” social relations, many of these accounts highlight the stubborn persistence and reproduction of *existing* ones. The daily realities of full-blown racism, misogyny, classism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia are widely noted and it is commonly argued that OWS was dominated by the voices and interests of heterosexual white men (A Bunch of Trans Women Occupiers, 2012; Appel, 2012; Hammond, 2015; Milkman et al., 2013, 2014; Phillips, 2012; Singh, 2012; Welty et al., 2013; Writers for the 99%, 2011, pp. 111–118; Yassin, 2012).

One of the key claims regarding the educational experience of OWS relates to institutions of mutual aid. It was through these (the kitchen, library, medical tent, and so on) that the occupiers were embodying, here and now, newly transformed social relations of care, equality, and solidarity (Crabapple, 2012). OWS was building the infrastructure of “a new commons,” and the forging of radical subjectivities occurred in and through the process of experimenting with new ways of being (Jaffe, 2012). The OWS Kitchen is often singled out for praise and heralded as a genuine example of mutual aid in action (Balkind, 2013). Its success, however, lay in the fact that it fed up to 5,000 people a day, not in the “extraordinary” or “revolutionary” social relations that underpinned it. One participant interviewed by Yen Liu (2012, p. 79) recounted a common tale:

He remembered being in the OWS kitchen one day, where a young woman of color asked a white man to clean the dishes he left in the sink, “The young white man said to her, ‘You do it, I’m doing important work.’ But who’s going to do the important work of washing dishes?”

The gendered division of labor within institutions of care was commonplace. The Jail Support Group attracted virtually no interest and consisted entirely of women (Hammond, 2015) and the same was true of waste disposal, a role so under-resourced that the women who did volunteer were reduced to tears of exhaustion and frustration (Halvorsen, 2015). While it is often suggested that the hope offered by OWS lay in “the lived practice of mutual aid and care” (Clover, 2012, p. 98), the reality is that institutions of care were afforded low priority, were neglected, and the social relations they embodied were predictably traditional.

Another key claim regarding OWS as an educational practice relates to horizontalism and consensus decision-making, the suggestion being that the experience of participating in a leaderless and non-hierarchical process would help cultivate an awareness of human beings as self-organizing and self-determining historical agents. Egalitarian relations of association, cooperation, and empowerment would supplement the revolutionary relations of love, care, and dignity embodied in the institutions of mutual aid, and together these would nurture confidence in the capacity of human beings to construct new ways of organizing life. In reality, however, a small group of *de facto* leaders emerged from within the movement, mainly white, male, and highly educated, and often referred to as a “vanguard” (Flank, 2011, p. 262; Kang, 2013, p. 68; Milkman et al., 2013, pp. 31–32; Schneider, 2012, p. 255). Meetings of the General Assembly, far from modeling radical democracy, were variously described as exclusionary, alienating, cultish, elitist, and profoundly undemocratic (Appel, 2012; Disalvo, 2015; Gessen, 2011; Kang, 2013; Kaufmann, 2011; Rowe & Carroll, 2015; Singsen, 2012; Szolucha, 2015; Taylor, 2011; Yen Liu, 2012). A common complaint was that “in practice, horizontalism often marginalized people of color, women, and sexual minorities” (Milkman et al., 2013, p. 31).

Part of the problem here lies in the indeterminacy of study as a mode of learning. Lewis lauds OWS for refusing to claim a political subjectivity and for leaving the question of inclusion “open.” The 99% remained a “primordially chaotic ontology” that evaded classification and “what emerged was precisely the *question* (and not the answer) of inclusion and exclusion” (Lewis, 2013, pp. 157, 159). The very lack of an answer, however, meant that the space opened up by OWS, far from remaining indeterminate, came to be filled by the logic of imperial white supremacist hetero-normative patriarchal capitalism (Ford, 2014). Thus, although OWS often presented itself as a home for the homeless, the actual homeless were

far from welcome. Discussions within Occupy mirrored the wider discourse of “deserving” and “underserving” poor, reproducing existing forms of structural violence and exclusion (Herring & Gluck, 2011; Phillips, 2012; Roth, 2011). More pointedly still, despite the question of inclusion/exclusion being held “open,” organizers thought nothing of excluding participants from Zuccotti Park if they were deemed to be disruptive, difficult, or dangerous (Graeber, 2013, p. 225; Maclean, 2012; Szolucha, 2015; Welty et al., 2013). Those excluded from the movement included several people of color deemed to be disruptive by virtue of their repeated protests against the ways in which horizontalism marginalized people of color (see Singh, 2012; Team Colors Collective, 2012). The mode of learning characteristic of OWS—the radical indeterminacy of study—precluded the movement from holding itself to account.

Astonishing claims, for example, were made about the transition to a post-racial society having already taken place in Zuccotti Park. The initial draft of the Declaration of the Occupation—such a crucial document because it was “the only authoritative statement of OWS’s platform” (Hammond, 2015, p. 291)—proclaimed those in Zuccotti Park “one people, *formerly divided by* the color of our skin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or lack thereof, political party and cultural background” (Ashraf, 2011, p. 33). It was left to a small group of people of color to fight tooth and nail to have the phrase “formerly divided by” removed and do the pedagogical work of providing “a crash course on white privilege, structural racism, and oppression” (Maharawal, 2011, p. 39; 2012a, p. 175). A document issued by the POC Working Group warned that: “By ignoring the dynamics of power and privilege, this monumental social movement risks replicating the very structures of injustice it seeks to eliminate” (Writers for the 99%, 2011, p. 114). The feeling among the core activists, however, was that a “post-racial” autonomous space had been created and the foundations of structural racism had been eradicated (Bray, 2013, pp. 96–97). White supremacy, shorn of its entrenched material basis, was now “a psychological attitude” that individuals could renounce (Croatoan, 2012, p. 82).

New transformed social relations did not emerge during the occupation of Zuccotti Park. The revolutionary surplus of the occupiers’ *potentia* was not released by the act of refusal. The No! did not bring forth, in and of itself, a wealth of Yeses. The refusals characteristic of study—the refusal to outline the contours of the new society being prefigured or to announce a determinate subjectivity (the architecture and ontology of the utopian method)—did not render OWS *radically* indeterminate or *radically* inoperative. The oscillating state of permanent suspension, in which the utopian possibilities contained within the movement were held im-potential and

resisted the call for actualization, led to paralysis and neglect. New social relations do not simply appear because a space has been inhabited (Walia, 2012, p. 166). “Social life does not automatically emerge. It has to be worked for” (Prashad, 2012, p. 8). A rupture might create the *possibility* of new forms of life, but cultivating them requires pedagogical work in the sphere of everyday reproduction. This is what was missing from OWS.

A motionless occupant

Bartleby would remain standing immovable in the middle of the room ... the motionless occupant of a naked room (Melville, 2016, pp. 33, 35).

Bartleby says No!, he refuses, he occupies a space on Wall Street, and he stays put. He refuses to issue demands, to account for himself, or engage with the kindly liberal discourse of his perplexed boss. He refuses to move, to eat, to *do* anything. He becomes still, pallid, petrified. The words most often used by Melville to describe Bartleby are “motionless” and “cadaverous” (Melville, 2016, pp. 11, 20, 22, 23, 25, 31). Bartleby himself says “I prefer to be stationary” and “I would prefer not to make any change at all” (Melville, 2016, pp. 37–38). Bartleby’s space—his “hermitage” as Melville describes it (2016, pp. 14, 16, 17, 19, 25, 31, 32)—is lifeless and devoid of any forward movement. His focus is on keeping everyone and everything out and his aim is self-containment in pursuit of ascetic purity (Desmaris, 2008). The ultimate effect of Bartleby’s refusal, however, is stasis and death.

This is a fitting analogy for Occupy Wall Street. The occupiers screamed No!, they occupied a space, they stayed put and they refused to issue demands or account for themselves. Many within the movement believed that the transformed social relations of a new community, of an other-doing, would emerge in and through the process of refusal and the sheer claiming of a space. What happened instead, however, is that the movement “began to harden” and ossify, became “calcified” and “cemented into something static” as it neglected to tend to its own institutions of care, neglected the social relations and practices of daily life that gave the movement its humanity (Adams, 2012; Bray, 2013, p. 263). An insular focus on “the construction of an exclusive, and at times asocial, cultural identity” (Bray, 2013, p. 264) saw the movement becoming increasingly lifeless, motionless, and cadaverous (Disalvo, 2015; Petrick, 2017; Smucker, 2012). It was nigh on impossible, of course, to survive the continuous harassment, intimidation, brutality, and state repression the occupation faced. By mid-November, however, Occupy had become moribund and its dissolution was greeted by some with relief (Caffentzis, 2012, p. 390; Gitlin, 2012, p. 69; Milkman et al., 2013, p. 34).

It is illustrative and indicative, I think, that OWS chose as their patron saint a figure who, as many recognize, strips himself of all humanity (Brás, 2015; Gersen, 2011; Hardesty, 2011; Martyris, 2011; McArdele, 2011). Just as Bartleby withdraws from human expression and human relationships in his effort to remain stationary, so too did Occupy as the activist core focused excessively on the tactic of withdrawal and protecting a carefully cultivated anarchist-autonomist ascetic purity (Bray, 2013, p. 80; Kang, 2013). As Stronzake rightly highlights: “An occupation that is reduced to nothing more than an occupation tends to end without changes to social reality or to the people that were involved” (2012, p. 121). One conclusion to be drawn from this is that “if, like poor Bartleby, OWS can never fully articulate what it wants—only what it rejects—it too, will waste away” (Allen, 2011). Bartleby is thus read as a cautionary tale of the dangers of being *only against* (Poore, 2011). This is the reading offered by Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 204), Rancière (2004, pp. 146–164), and Žizek (2012, p. 82). More than this, however, Bartleby signals that an act of intransigent refusal does not in and of itself possess constituent power. Resistance at the symbolic level—at the level of saying No, of occupying a space, issuing no demands, and cultivating an aura of inscrutability—is not enough. The rupture created by a scream of No! does not necessarily open onto a field of Yeses. Work is needed. It is not simply the case of “Needing a Vision” (utopian architecture). It is also a case of working tirelessly to sustain the human relations from which such a vision can emerge (utopian ontology). Bartleby wasted away, not because he did not articulate what he wanted, but because he relinquished his humanity. The lacunae within OWS were as much related to the neglect of human bonds at the level of daily life as they were to the lack of a grand strategic vision. What I argue in the next section is that pedagogical work is needed to connect the two.

Pedagogical direction

Bartleby: “I like to be stationary” (Melville, 2016, pp. 37–38).

Lewis is right to refer to OWS as an expression of weak utopianism, or what I term below “the utopian impulse.” This is no small thing. However, to have a *transformative* effect on subject formation and the social world, the utopian impulse needs direction. Pedagogy is required to guide movement actors’ learning. Without this, as David Harvey rightly highlights, weak utopianism remains “a pure signifier of hope destined never to acquire a material referent,” an infinitely circulating self-referential process that has “the habit of getting lost in the romanticism of endlessly open projects” (2000, pp. 189, 174). This was true of OWS, its rejection of

“strong” utopian architecture and ontology and its strategy instead of dwelling in the paralyzing indeterminacy of study.

My reading of the utopian impulse starts from the simple premise that in and through the process of social life (the process of creating and sustaining families, friendships, communities, commitments, and forms of co-operation), imaginary landscapes take shape. These landscapes comprise complex, fluid, and often contradictory patterns of desires, needs, fears, hostilities, dreams, ethical norms, symbolic meanings, etc., and the landscapes emerge through a collective process of engagement, struggle, contestation, and shared learning. The utopian impulse—we might also call it the utopian *moment*, the utopian *shift*, the change in momentum implied by the word “impulse”—arises when utopian desire and a utopian horizon are located and *felt* within these imaginary landscapes. I emphasize the affective dimension because we might describe the utopian impulse as “the discovery of a new structure of feeling” (Williams, 1991, p. 266); a structure of feeling that emerges when the imaginary landscapes born of the processes and struggles of social life point to the reconstitution of the *totality* of material conditions giving rise to experiences of alienation, exploitation, degradation, mineralization, and oppression.

Occupy Wall Street signaled such a shift and such a moment. OWS was a significant revolutionary event, the discovery of a new structure of feeling oriented toward the reconstitution of the social totality, an expression of *the utopian impulse*. As it first emerges, however, the new structure of feeling is elusive, amorphous, and inchoate. Within the imaginaries of social groups and movements, one may talk of utopian desire and a utopian horizon “even if movement actors can’t fully or completely articulate what it might look like” (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 126). Kelley refers to this as “poetic knowledge,” collective efforts to see and map the future that circulate at the level of poetic evocation (2002, pp. 9–10). Within OWS, the utopian impulse circulated at the level of poetic evocation, as an inchoate amorphous collective desire, but lacked articulation (Duda, 2012; Grusin, 2011; Husted & Hansen, 2017; Lawler, 2011; Wright, 2012). The hope of OWS was a guttural hope of protest felt in the stomach and the skin. The keywords used by activists at the time were “restlessness,” “agitation,” “unsettling unease,” “indignation and anger,” “discomfort and annoyance” (Mizen, 2015). This was a directionless critical hope underpinned by the sense that something’s missing, born in the darkness of the lived moment, experienced as restless, nauseous, passionate indignation and directed toward the negation of the conditions giving rise to profound injustices (see Webb, 2007, 2013a, 2022). As one activist put it: “We have no clear idea how life should really feel... We sense something is wrong only

through the odd clue... We notice a vague spiritual nausea... a... emptiness... darkness” (Anon, 2011).

The core activists within OWS famously rejected the need for a utopian vision of an alternative way of being. They chose instead to dwell in a suspended state of indeterminacy. What this meant, however, is that Occupy remained a “vast, inchoate” movement of “global restlessness” (Solnit, 2016, p. 109), “the site of inchoate, undertheorized encounters” (Chrostowska, 2016, p. 285) but never became a force that took the world by the throat and committed itself to the positive annunciation of a liberating utopia. OWS was, in John Holloway’s terms, a crack, a momentary rupture in capitalist space-time. As Holloway says of the cracks, “there is always an insufficiency about it, an incompleteness, a restlessness” (2010b, p. 35). My argument here is that, without guidance and direction, the cracks do not open out into anything new. As Holloway (2010b, p. 22) remarks, “it also happens that people get tired and the crack freezes over again.”

Karl Mannheim argued long ago that “it is a very essential feature of modern history that in the gradual organization for collective action social classes become effective in transforming historical reality only when their aspirations are embodied in utopias appropriate to the changing situation” (Mannheim, 1940, p. 187). For Mannheim, there is a crucial role for pedagogy here in giving a clear utopian form to popular aspirations. The utopian conceptions of the pedagog seize on currents present within the imaginary landscapes of group members, give expression to them, flow back into the outlook of a social group, and are translated by this group into action. Rather than corresponding directly to a concrete body of articulated needs, the active utopia “transmits” and “articulates” the amorphous “collective impulse” of a group (pp. 185–186), its poetic knowledge. Within OWS, however, the stubborn insistence that the occupiers were “already free”—and of course, within the “educational suspension” of study “it is im-potential that allows freedom to flourish” (Lewis, 2013, p. 44, p. 7)—meant that no pedagogical work was required to tease out and give shape to the inchoate needs and desires of participants.

An argument for pedagogical direction inevitably raises questions of power and authority together with a host of accompanying fears and suspicions. I have addressed some of the fears concerning a call for “strong” utopianism elsewhere (see Webb, 2013b, 2016, 2017). It is worth emphasizing here, however, that the project of utopia-building as I see it is always and necessarily a *collective* endeavor and an *iterative* process, but one within which pedagogical intervention plays a crucial facilitating role. The role of pedagogy within social movements is to “convoke” the radical imagination, animating, enlivening, drawing together, and building on the amorphous utopian imaginings of movement members; the poetic

knowledge referred to by Kelley. To “convoke” is “to call something which is not yet fully present into being” (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 61). Pedagogical work is required to articulate movement actors’ strong if inchoate emotions, call them into being, crystallize them and present them back in the form of a vision (see Webb, 2017). Crucially, as McKenzie Wark (2011) stresses, the pedagog’s role is “an adjunct one,” providing “a language for what the movement already knows.”

This is consistent with a Freirean approach to educational activism within social movements. Echoing Wark, Freire emphasized repeatedly that: “What is implied is not the transmission to the people of a knowledge previously elaborated, a process that ignores what they already know, but the act of returning to them, in an organized form, what they themselves offered in a disorganized form” (1978, pp. 24–25). Pedagogical work is crucial within social movements so that the amorphous desires of the utopian impulse are given a deeper cognitive foundation and a sharper, more precise shape. To highlight the need for pedagogical work is not to signal the need for something like a Party (Dean, 2012; Ford, 2016). It is rather to say that if social movements are to operate as “experiments in knowledge production, radical imagination, subjectification, and concrete alternative-building” (Khasnabish, 2012, p. 237) then this requires “intensive *internal* work” (Maharawal, 2012b, p. 182). It requires organized collective learning. The nature and role of organic or movement intellectuals is beyond the scope of this paper (see Holst, 2002, pp. 80–93). I share Holst’s concern, however, that the radical potential of organized “education” (what Lewis would term *learning*) within social movements might be getting lost amidst the focus on social movement “learning” (what Lewis terms *study*) (Holst, 2018, p. 81).

Conclusion

Lawyer: *Ah Bartleby, Ah humanity!* (Melville, 2016, p. 42)

Drawing general conclusions from specific cases is fraught with danger and I would point instead to the complex determinants of particular social and political movements. This is not to suggest that OWS “cannot be submitted to evaluation” at all (Lewis, 2013, p. 52). Lewis remarks approvingly that “Bartleby had nothing to say for himself, no clear project that he could articulate beyond ‘preferring not to.’” (Lewis, 2013, p. 51). Rather than embodying a radical and threatening indeterminacy, Melville’s short story ends—as the lawyer-narrator sighs “Ah Bartley, Ah humanity”—with Bartleby’s recuperation by a humanizing liberalism that incorporates his resistance into an untroubling ethical narrative. The very inscrutability of Bartleby allows the compassionate liberal lawyer to construct his own

account that brings Bartleby into the comforting fold of liberal humanism (Bojesen and Allen, 2019; Castronovo, 2014; Edelman, 2013). The analogy with OWS has some resonance here. Hazan and Kamo, for example, suggest that OWS “led to a certain awareness among types of individuals who until then had been politically somnolent. That was not insignificant but hardly earth-shaking: democratic capitalism has seen their like before, and anyway it regards such movements with benevolent amusement” (2014, p. 13). Benevolent amusement is precisely how the lawyer comes to regard Bartleby’s resistance.

The principal aim of the paper has been to draw attention to the importance of pedagogical direction within revolutionary utopian movements. The creative energy, *bios*, lifeforce, *potentia*, that Hardt and Negri locate in the multitude, is not always or necessarily released as a generative surplus/excess through a mere act of refusal. The overflowing power-to-do identified by Holloway does not in and of itself fill the opening created by a rupture. As Bartleby shows us, simply claiming a space, saying No! and demanding to be left alone is not enough. Without intensive internal pedagogical work, such a mode of refusal can lead to stasis, paralysis, and an inward-looking spiral of self-destruction. OWS was bursting with inchoate, unarticulated, amorphous desires but lacked the language and imagery to fully articulate them. By choosing to dwell in the im-potential state of study, preferring not to announce the architecture and ontology of a utopian project, the space of indeterminacy was soon colonized by logics of domination and exclusion the movement was seeking to rupture. This was true not only in Zuccotti Park but in other sites across the USA (as is evident in collections, such as *Scenes from Occupied America* and *We are Many*) and elsewhere (Earl, 2018, offers an excellent study of London, for example). Todd Gitlin remarks that Occupy became “its own school. It learned from itself” (2012, p. 226). But to a great extent, as I have argued throughout this paper, processes of learning were paralyzed by the collective sense that “we are already free,” by the refusal to address questions of political ontology, and by the decision to engage in prefigurative experiments within a directionless state of permanent suspension.

Notes on contributor

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