

Mobilizing Ideas

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Some Occupy Sci-Fi

By [Nathan Schneider](#)

On September 17 of 2011, until NYPD Commissioner Raymond Kelly called back his shock troops at around 11 p.m., I didn't think Occupy Wall Street would survive the night. Neither, for that matter, did many of the organizers, whose planning process I had been reporting on since August. But survive it did. So, as the occupation eventually persisted and grew, I made a rule for myself: Don't try making any predictions about this movement—you will probably be wrong. When people ask me to predict where Occupy is going, I usually just talk about the progress of its older-sibling movements in Greece and Spain and elsewhere, and they've been pretty good bellwethers so far.

In that spirit, I'll permit myself to break the rule against prediction just this once, thanks to the conceit that [Bosi and Romanos](#) describe in a recent book by Spanish activists, *La Carta de los Comunes*, which tells the story of post-revolutionary Madrid in 2033. This kind of futurism right now is just too irresistible. Please forgive me, therefore, as I work my way toward some Occupy sci-fi, starting from the near future and moving toward the distant.

In the near-term, we're already starting to see where Occupy is heading. Absent (for the moment, at least) the encampments, people are doing a lot of one-day, focused, issue-based mobilizing. The movement is making strategic partnerships with existing, more traditional organizations, which, as [Amenta](#) points out, can help it survive and grow, especially (with their heated offices) through the winter months. These organizations are drawing on established ties with local communities, like those that did groundwork for "Occupy Our Homes"; they provide alternatives to large financial institutions, like the small banks that benefited from the "Move Your Money" campaign; they represent workers in key sectors of the economy, like the unions discussed by [Dixon](#) that were involved in the port shutdowns; they have networks all over the country, like Move to Amend, which has called for "Occupy the Courts" against *Citizens United*; and they offer the spiritual and temporal resources for perseverance, like the churches that provide sanctuary to evicted occupiers.

In each case, the movement only really remains movement if it's radicalizing these organizations beyond business as usual—confronting authorities that are increasingly willing to violate civil liberties as their authority becomes threatened. ([Cook](#) is not the only one I've known to see the turmoil at Occupy NOLA as a sign of things to come for other American cities.) Movements succeed, and revolution can happen, when civil society begins to turn against the status quo in decisive ways, taking big risks and tying their lot to that of the movement. This may take time.

Which brings us to the somewhat longer-term future. The movement's defining challenge of 2012 seems to me that of creating a politics more vibrant, more attractive, more tangible, and more powerful than what presidential candidates awash in corporate cash can muster. [Gamson](#) and [Dixon](#) each tellingly remind us how Occupy Wall Street reinvigorated many people's political imagination over the past year. This will be much, much harder in an election

year, as billions are being spent to enforce a collective stupor of two-party dualism. To break the spell, the movement will escalate its acts of resistance that inspire and empower people. It will also do what it did in Liberty Plaza, and even more so—give glimpses of the kinds of alternative institutions that [Liu](#), and [Bosi and Ramanos](#), discuss. It will be a beloved community, providing basic necessities wherever possible, like a good church would. Maybe more churches will even see where the wind is blowing and help.

As the November election approaches, the movement will have pushed the issues that matter to it to the fore, rather than the usual cults of personality that serve to obscure the substance of debate. There will be big protests at both party conventions and big police crackdowns. But the movement will also show the public how to put the election in perspective. When the technocratic, “silent majority” flavor of the right wing wins the election, as has happened in Greece and Spain, as happened after a year of protest in 1968 here, it can’t seem like a defeat. By then, people will have recognized that the movement offers them something better than anything that can yet be had at the ballot box, no matter who wins. Those who once identified with both the right and the left will realize, through the movement, that they have more in common than they’d once thought.

Eventually, there comes the endgame, alongside flying cars made on the Moon. This is hard to talk about. It will probably mean redefining certain parts of our vocabulary, just as we’ve had to redefine the word “occupy” itself over the past year.

Even if some occupiers themselves might disagree with me, I doubt that this movement is ultimately about, as [Jason Hicke](#) (cited by Cook) fears, reclaiming “decent, middle class lives.” My guess is that this is spiraling us toward an entirely different vision of what political life can look like—a new Declaration of the Rights of Man? Of course this will only mean anything if there’s also a strategic vision for carrying out a global, local, decentralized-but-unified movement of movements, by undermining the pillars of support that perpetuate the consolidation of wealth and political power through the worldwide military-financial-petroleum complex. (Deep breath.) Sounds crazy, I know, except that something like this is already happening, from Wall Street to Oakland, from Wukan to Athens, from Santiago to Cairo. Most of us know decency and dignity and environmental stewardship and solidarity and freedom when we see them, and we’re not seeing anything close to them from our faltering nation-states. As soon as a realistic alternative begins to come into view, won’t people jump for it en masse?

That’s when we begin to see a new structure of democratic global governance and economy emerging. It’s neither utopian nor unproblematic. But at least corporate profit is not the dominant structure of civil society, and basic human needs are non-negotiable guarantees, and violence is not a tolerable method of problem-solving, and the autonomy of individuals and directly-democratic groups is the fundamental unit of political legitimacy. There is incessant drumming.

Those are the sorts of things that people have found in the Occupy movement when they come, stay awhile, and let themselves be transformed by it. If the movement is halfway honest with itself, therefore, that’s the outcome it stands for. Getting there, if in fact we ever do or even want to, will take patience and struggle like we can’t even begin to imagine now. Maybe we’ll see in 2033.

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