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From One Moment to the Next, Wisconsin to Wall Street

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I was brought to New York to make a few remarks about the Wisconsin Uprising at the Creative Time Summit 3. Having just arrived in Manhattan, I found myself catching a cab to Liberty and Broadway, urged in by a New York activist friend who foresaw a Troy Davis protest march soon converging on the Occupy Wall Street encampment in Zuccotti Park, a granite-blocked open space in the canyon of the financial district. I made it there just in time to see and hear the marchers bearing down on the occupied park.

THE SYSTEM!
IS RACIST!
THEY KILLED TROY DAVIS!

THE SYSTEM!
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THEY LYNCHED TROY DAVIS!

This was the chant in the air, in many voices as one, over and over. Troy Davis, an African-American man sentenced to death for a murder he had likely not committed, had been legally killed by the State of Georgia less than 24 hours earlier, in the face of an

international effort to grant Davis a stay of execution. A hastily organized speak-out event in Union Square turned into an impromptu march. The energy crested when hundreds of enraged protestors met up with the Occupy Wall Street activists in the park.

It was Thursday, September 22, and the occupation was going into its sixth night. Although to a careless observer it might look like all the same people, this was in fact an encounter of potential, between activist worlds not quite in solid alliance. The marchers represented a part of the activist universe different than the Occupy Wall Street campers—namely, the worlds of death penalty abolition, wrongful conviction activism, prisoners' rights groups, punk anti-racism, human rights organizations, criminal justice reform work, and efforts to end racial profiling and police brutality. Though many individual activists are undoubtedly comfortable with different ways of thinking about particular social injustices, the death penalty activists do not usually frame their work against the problems of financialized capital. This is necessarily true once you get beyond abstract analyses and bumper sticker sloganeering and go into the concreteness of legal challenges, policy work, and legislative reform.

By contrast, the OWS encampment seemed to be populated mostly with young people newly radicalized by the economic crisis, the debt burdens of themselves and their parents, the evident wealth gaps, and the fast withering democracy in their country, all foisted upon them in their formative years. I saw some graybeards scattered around the plaza, but it was the early twenty-somethings, carrying with them the slightest vibe of desperation, who made up the core.

The temporary presence of the Troy Davis constituency, self-identified as having been organized around and motivated by a political cause and movement with its own discourse, history, political fronts, and priorities, raised the temptation to speedily conflate one dissenting, outraged, and righteous segment of society with another. On that evening, the articulation of an equivalence seemed to be strangely and perhaps wisely resisted. The momentary satisfactions of unity were shared through the aesthetic experience, the surge of feeling that went through the combined crowd, generated by the encounter between two groups of committed people, each standing for radical social change. It made sense; there was not much to say, as neither group had any further recourse, at least not at that stage. What seemed most important was what in fact happened, that is, simply taking the time to be together, to let communications run informally at the molecular level, person-to-person, until the enlarged crowd eventually dissipated. This episode is worth recounting because it prefigured some of the complexities of Occupy Wall Street that we are seeing now, in the third week.

Over the weekend part of my mind stayed on Wisconsin, for two reasons, neither being the Creative Time gig. First, there was the inevitable comparison with OWS—I could not help this, as the Wisconsin Uprising is now my movement frame of reference, like it is for everybody from Madison, and possibly for today's labor movement as a whole. Second, being invested in the Wisconsin movement as a resident of that state, of course I followed the two breaking state political stories of that weekend: new coverage of the ongoing FBI corruption investigation into the Walker regime, and the latest efforts by the regressives to rewrite mining regulations in face of citizen and indigenous tribal opposition.

In regards to the first point, ie the comparison between OWS and the Wisconsin Uprising, I tried to absorb the mood, setting,

rhetoric, and activist profile, and put all in relation to Wisconsin at the same one-week point. Of the many differences, what strikes me now as probably the most consequential in terms of movement character and future evolution, is the comparatively abstract target: "Wall Street," or "the banksters" or the 1%. In Wisconsin we have a central figure, Governor Scott Walker, and a host of background players (the Fitzgeralds, the Kochs, Paul Ryan, Alberta Darling, JB Van Hollen, etc), each of whom is a real person who can be personally targeted. Most of them being public figures, their career trajectories, at least, offer activists something by which we can measure our strength. With OWS, the monster before us—the banking structure, the corporate political system, and financialized capital in its entirety—is so huge, global, faceless, out of control, and fundamentally rotten, that it is difficult even for informed people to identify and prioritize specific aims, much less individual targets.

As for the second point, it is important to understand that even though the massive mediagenic protests in Madison are long over, the movement continues on any number of specific, localized and continually unfolding fronts. Each of these battles requires resources and prolonged attention. To lose focus on them is to lose the war, because it is in these localized theaters that the actual implementation of the regressive agenda happens. As OWS moves through a growth phase of insurgency in which well-articulated generalities attract participants, and in which people situated in very different contexts can recognize themselves and organize for parallel uprisings, the other side of follow-through political struggle—the tediousness, dedication, and minutiae of in-depth, localized research, organizing, and action—must be expected and planned for. It is in the particular instances of policy execution that the corruption from above touches the ground, that is to say,

where it is most readily witnessed, exposed, directly confronted, and arrested.

My feeling is, because OWS has from the beginning called into account *a system* rather than persons or groups, compared to Wisconsin the movement has more long term potential for growth and endurance. This is for two reasons, one obvious and one less so. First, systems themselves are broad and endure, outlasting the reach and careers of any single, embodied villain. Though it is true that systems can crumble in amazingly short order, the conventional wisdom says that, for example, the system we refer to as "Wall Street" will outlast Scott Walker's tenure as governor. As long as the target remains, the opposition, now sparked, may as well.

The less obvious reason is also less positive in the short term. The abstract truth of the OWS critique reaches a limit on the ground. That is to say, the shared reality of living under a single system can fuel a mass movement only until that shared reality begins to fray in the uneven geography of capital. This problem is exemplified by the second point related to Wisconsin above; who, outside of the people of northern Wisconsin, knows or cares about the devastation of long wall mining now looming over the Penokee Hills? Every mining disaster, every home foreclosure, every supermax prison is sited in a local context, against which it casts its most heavily weighted shadow, rendering abstractions about systemic operations nearly moot. In Wisconsin it is already an achievement in translocal activism that many people in southern and urban areas have come to recognize *the system* as it takes this particular form in another part of the state—and that is under the comparatively unifying regime of the villain Walker. Thus the question for OWS—and really any new US left formation of national scale—is how does the movement embed within itself the

function of articulation, as Laclau and Mouffe define that term, and apply it to these problems of translocal activism?*

This was the underlying challenge I perceived in the Troy Davis march-turned OWS rally. How is Wall Street and the market theocracy it has imposed on the world readable in the Troy Davis travesty, and in prison-related issues generally? How can the one be articulated as the other, but in a way that preserves routes into the untransferable realms of tedious and specialized campaigns that define all of the specific, localized battles? These kinds of questions become more important as different constituencies, each with its own history, demands, and ongoing campaigns, joins OWS—an accelerating development as the occupation as of now looks toward a fourth week. Clearly, grappling with the essential fluidity and unfixed nature of the discursive identities that make up the socialist terrain, within a movement context, presents short term challenges. Familiar fractures are being voiced within OWS even as I write. But if properly negotiated, even partially, the current internal challenge also hints at a long term possibility we have not seen in the US since Seattle: a terrain of understood alliances able to shift, divide, and reconstitute according to the uneveness of capital itself. Again as Laclau and Mouffe might say, we will in time have before us a field of *moments*, each one an instance and place of movement identity only readable in relation to others, from northern Wisconsin to Occupy Wall Street, to the world.

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* "...we will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of

the articulatory practice." *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, p. 105.