

**The Prefigurative Prince:
An Anarcho-Gramscian Ethnography of the
Occupy Vancouver General Assembly**

by

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Abstract

In the thesis that follows, I have reconstructed the dialectical theory of Antonio Gramsci, a twentieth century Marxist scholar and Italian Communist Party activist. In particular, I have aimed to render Gramsci's concepts more relevant to the obstacles faced by contemporary social movement activists. My reconstructive efforts are grounded in an ethnography that I performed while serving as an activist and facilitator for Occupy Vancouver, a social movement and prefigurative political community most active between October and November, 2011. As an Occupy Vancouver participant, I was privy to some of the systematic ways in which macro-scale institutions – such as patriarchy and the nation-state - can create institutional contexts that are frequently internalized by social movement participants, finding expression through activists' exclusionary or marginalizing practices. By employing Gramscian concepts, I have sought to clarify these oppressive institutional tendencies, with the goal of enabling more equitable and inclusive social movement structures.

Keywords: Gramscian theory; dialectical theory; critical realism; social movements; feminism; ethnography

Dedication

To the many activists who have participated in the Occupy/Decolonize Movement

And in loving memory of Michael – friend, theorist, and fellow Occupier

“With this I send you a gift which, if it bears no proportion to the extent of the obligations which I owe you, is nevertheless the best that I am able to offer you; for I have endeavored to embody in it all that long experience and assiduous research have taught me of the affairs of the world. And as neither yourselves nor any one else can ask more than that of me, you cannot complain that I have not given you more; though you may well complain of my lack of talent when my arguments are poor, and of the fallacies of my judgment on account of the errors into which I have doubtless fallen many times. This being so, however, I know not which of us has the greater right to complain, - I, that you should have forced me to write what I should never have attempted of my own accord, or you, that I should have written without giving you cause to be satisfied.”

-Niccolo Machiavelli's dedication to Zanobi Buondelmonte and Cosimo Rucellai,
Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius

Acknowledgements

The ensuing pages have resulted from a fundamentally collective effort. Although I wrote the thesis, recorded the interviews, and contributed some university-based social theory, the arguments that follow recount experiences shared by a number of activists over the course of two tumultuous and exciting months in 2011. Therefore, it is to the activists of Occupy Vancouver that I offer my first acknowledgement. The experiences described herein – both the emancipatory and the oppressive – would not have been possible if not for their commitment to social justice.

I would also like to acknowledge the continuing intellectual and spiritual contributions of my undergraduate professors, notably Marlboro College's Meg Mott and Jerry Levy. Without these teachers, I would know little about social theory, and even less about the world it seeks to describe.

I would also like to thank my professors at Simon Fraser University, particularly my advisors Ann Travers and John Bogardus. Having attended an undergraduate institution very different than Simon Fraser's, the transition to a large, bureaucratic, and corporatized university is still a difficult one to navigate. Both of these professors have made the process infinitely easier, and the thesis that follows is largely the result of their various forms of support and encouragement.

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By way of an Epitaph

Below is an excerpt from my interview with Mark, an Occupy Vancouver activist and a member of Occupy Vancouver's medical team:

Ben: I think one of the really fascinating things about the fact that there was a tent city and these GAs [general assemblies] is that you had this huge diversity of people who, outside of Occupy, would never have talked to each other let alone made decisions together.

Mark: Oh, exactly, exactly, you had...homeless people who came there because it was a safe place where, you know, nobody would judge them, they weren't threatened with the type of physical [police] violence they'd see in [Vancouver's] Downtown East Side...There were people there from very privileged backgrounds setting up tents in solidarity. There was a couple there who conceived their baby at Occupy Vancouver who were looking for housing in Vancouver and decided, "screw it, we're gonna live at Occupy for now" while they were apartment hunting. So, yeah, [the Occupy Vancouver] tent city was very diverse and the people who were coming down daily were a very diverse crew with all types of backgrounds; people like you, people like me, we had [Simon Fraser University] professors, we had union leaders, we had native elders, we had...everybody, everybody.

Ben: So given this diversity, what kinds of contradictions did you see resulting from all these different people being together, if any?

Mark: Oh, lots, lots, you had, you know...there was a crew of libertarian, rather privileged, rather disenfranchised white males who were all part of the legalize marijuana pro pot lobby who I watched for weeks try to steer Occupy towards their agenda...in fact, that happened a lot. There were various direct special interest groups that would make proposals to [the] GA that were quite obviously [self-interested]...there were a lot of conflicts that way...There were a lot of First Nations people there who had felt that - and they were right - that First Nations outreach by Occupy hadn't been done properly and that we weren't respecting them...and then there were - I was one of the people, I gotta say - who were quite ignorant of how many women were leaving the Movement because of sexual harassment on site, very obvious misogyny on site, a lack of feeling safe at the encampment as a women coming and going alone..and, yeah, worlds collided, and all of the issues that our larger society has [were] reflected in that encampment one way or another in a much more concentrated form, because we were on a small piece of ground with a small group of people intensely interacting...so, yeah, all of those things boiled to the surface much more readily because it was so concentrated.

Chapter 1.

Theorizing Occupy Vancouver

Not long ago, the sociologist Richard J.F. Day issued a metaphorical elegy for Antonio Gramsci, the 20th century scholar, activist, and Italian Communist Party leader. “Gramsci,” Day enthusiastically proclaimed in the title of his recent book, “is Dead” (2005). The slogan attempted to communicate Gramsci’s irrelevance vis-a-vis contemporary social movements, and summarized Day’s use of post-structuralist and post-anarchist theory to discredit the political ideas of Gramsci almost seventy years after the Marxist thinker’s literal death in 1937.

If Gramsci risks being left for dead – and Day is by no means the only contemporary theorist who has attempted to discredit the Italian scholar’s legacy - then my present thesis should be seen as an attempt to resuscitate Gramscian theory. With Day, I concede that Gramsci looks sickly, confused, and out of place in the context of contemporary activist currents, many of which deviate from the state-, party-, and class-centric movements prominent in Gramsci’s day. However, I posit that what Day calls “the newest social movements” in no way demonstrate the irrelevance of Gramscian theory; indeed, the conflicts, obstacles, and day-to-day difficulties experienced by contemporary activists provide a strong argument for the continued importance of Gramscian ideas, assuming these ideas are reconstructed so as to better meet the needs, tactics, and values of present-day activists.

In the thesis that follows, I have attempted to reconstruct Gramscian concepts by drawing upon a participatory and politically-engaged ethnography of Occupy Vancouver (hereafter “OV”) - a social movement and self-governing community active in Vancouver, British Columbia, between October and November of 2011. In particular, I will employ Gramscian, neo-Gramscian, and dialectical materialist concepts to clarify the power struggles and hierarchies that constituted OV’s “General Assembly,” the decision-making

forum in which activists deliberated and decided upon movement-related policy. In the remainder of the present chapter, I will expand upon the setting and methodology entailed by my field work at Occupy Vancouver. Then, I will present an overview of Gramsci's central concepts - such as "hegemony," "civil society," and "common sense" - followed by a summary of my argument and an outline of my thesis's various chapters.

1.1. My Field of Research: Occupy Vancouver

On October 15th, 2011, a diverse body of international protesters introduced the Occupy Movement to the world. Whereas the Movement was previously most active in New York City and other United States metropolises, the October 15th "Day of Global Protest" planted occupations across the globe. By 29 October, 2011, there existed roughly 2300 occupations in approximately 2000 cities worldwide, including that of Vancouver, British Columbia, where Occupy Vancouver established a tent city and self-governing community in front of the city's Vancouver Art Gallery (Gelder, 2011). Beginning on October 15th and continuing in the ensuing days, "the 99%" – the Occupy Movement's designation for the world's oppressed majority - converged in front of the Art Gallery, pitching tents, participating in marches, and debating pressing issues relevant to social change and to OV's self-governing community.

In the pages ahead, I will describe Occupy Vancouver and its General Assembly in detail. For my present purposes, I will briefly summarize three important institutions that influenced daily life within OV, each of which embodied the values of prefiguration that proved central to the Occupy Movement. The term "prefiguration" will play a considerable role in my thesis, and so a more apt definition is warranted before I elaborate OV's institutions. Take, for instance, the following interpretations of the term:

- In her historical study of direct democracy in American social movements, Francesca Polletta (2002) claimed that prefiguration entails "movement groups whose internal structure is characterized by a minimal division of labour, decentralized authority, and an egalitarian ethos and whose decisionmaking [sic] is direct and consensus oriented" (p.6).
- David Graeber (2013), an anarchist ethnographer and a core organizer for Occupy Wall Street, has described prefiguration as "the idea that the

organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create” (Ch. 1, Sec. 5, Para. 12).

In my own usage, I refer to prefiguration as implying both A) a decentralised, direct democratic organizational form, and B) a tactic by which social movements and other radical communities attempt to render dominant institutions superfluous. Having thus defined “prefiguration,” I will now introduce some of the institutions that constituted Occupy Vancouver, each of which embodied prefigurative principles in important ways:

The Tent City: Perhaps the most visible feature of the Occupy Movement was its use of public space. Most of the local occupations asserted sovereignty over a segment of public land, inviting activists to pitch tents and establish services such as food provision, medical care, and access to activist-run libraries, each of which were offered to the public free of charge. Occupy Vancouver’s tent city was located on the lawn bordering the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), a large and iconic museum located in the city’s business district. Bordered on one side by the VAG, and on three sides by busy downtown streets, the OV tent city quickly became a symbolic focal point through which activists engaged with state, corporate, and media institutions, as well as with the many pedestrians whose daily routines led them to participate in tent city life.

General Assemblies and the Consensus Process: Most of the tent cities allocated a portion of occupied space for the purposes of hosting regular public forums entitled “general assemblies” (GAs); at OV, this space comprised the east-facing stairs of the VAG. On any given day, Occupy Vancouver would host between one and two general assemblies, during which activists and interested bystanders would gather in the space adjacent to the VAG staircase in order to discuss, debate, and consent to policies governing OV’s daily operation. Importantly, the general assemblies were run according to a consensus-based process, which strove to create an inclusive and equitable framework in which participants could formulate policies amenable to everyone present. Indeed, the GA process was designed such that even a small number of dissenting voices could issue a “block,” thereby vetoing a proposal, or at least delaying said proposal’s passage until all dissenting voices could be heard.

The Organizational Model of Occupy Vancouver: The organizational model of OV was decentralized and, at least in principle, non-hierarchical. Many decisions were

made not by the general assemblies, but by specialized committees, such as those responsible for planning tent city life, for maintaining “the People’s Library,” or for planning the daily general assemblies. Importantly, there were no formal representatives at Occupy Vancouver; no OV activist was entitled to speak for fellow activists in any official sense, and the barriers impeding activists’ participation in leadership roles – such as that of “facilitator” or “media spokesperson” - were typically low. Nevertheless, there were often considerable *informal* hierarchies within Occupy Vancouver and its general assembly process, even in the absence of formalized positions of power. Identifying these hierarchies – as well as the modes of exclusion on which they were based - will prove a central topic of the present thesis.

Occupy Vancouver’s tent city lasted for about five weeks, until it was evicted on the orders of a provincial injunction in early November, 2011. Without the visibility and presence that the tent city afforded activists, Occupy Vancouver lost many of its participants, and OV-affiliated events became increasingly scattered and infrequent (although OV’s Environmental Justice Committee continued to meet as an independent body). As of summer, 2013, Occupy Vancouver has an active page on Facebook, and participants still attend protests as friends and as participants in shared social networks; however, OV itself has little formal presence in protests and does not frequently hold its own events.

1.2. My Research Model: The Extended Case Method

Social theory has served as both the conceptual starting point for my research, as well as its reconstructed final product. In the very act of employing concepts such as “dialectics” and “hegemony,” I have sought to discover how they might be reinterpreted or altered so as to prove more relevant to prefigurative activists. As such, my use of social theory has borrowed much from the “extended case method” popularized by sociologist Michael Burawoy (1998), which “applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the “micro” to the “macro,” and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (p. 5). In doing so, the extended case method enables ethnographers to generalize their research findings, even when their field work has comprised a small

number of ethnographic sites that fail to constitute a representative sample. Asks Burawoy,

If representation is not feasible, is there any other way of producing generality? Instead of inferring generality directly from data, we can move from one generality to another, to more inclusive generality. We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory. We do not worry about the uniqueness of our case since we are not as interested in its "representativeness" as its contribution to "reconstructing" theory (p. 16).

Burawoy's insights are critical in relation to my own work. For, nothing about my single ethnographic sight - or about my highly participatory and engaged research methods - aimed to generate a representative sample that was untainted by personal involvement with my field. Rather, I have aimed to synthesize my findings by defending, challenging, and reconstructing dialectical and Gramscian theory, such that future prefigurative activists can benefit from their corresponding concepts in a manner uncompromised by their frequent association with state-, party-, and class-centric forms of social change.

My use of the extended case study has employed several methods, including those of participant observation and active interviewing. I will now clarify each of these methods in turn:

A) Participant Observation: I commenced my observations of Occupy Vancouver on October 15th, 2011 - the first day of OV's occupation. These observations occurred primarily within the bounds of the OV encampment located on the east side of the Vancouver Art Gallery, where Occupy Vancouver activists constructed the bulk of their tent city. Although many of my observations were made during the occupation's daily general assemblies, my experiences as an OV activist also entailed spending nights in the OV tent city, serving on OV's facilitation and de facto organizing committee, as well as participating in numerous protests and other movement-related events. My observations at the tent city lasted until November of 2011, when the tent city was dismantled on the order of provincial authorities.

B) Active Interviews: I have complemented my ethnographic research with eleven open-ended interviews incorporating a strategy of "active interviewing" – that is, an approach to interviewing that treats the research subject as a colleague in knowledge production, rather than as an object for knowledge-extraction (Holstein and Gubrium,

1997). Specifically, the active interview treats knowledge production as “more dialogic than monologic, and...as something produced in human interaction, not merely “extracted” from naive informants who are unaware of the hidden agendas coming from the outsider” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 25). My interview participants consisted primarily of activists with whom I possessed a pre-existing familiarity through our mutual participation in Occupy Vancouver. As a result, my interviews were typically casual, conversational, and open-ended, often focusing on elements of OV activism with which the interviewee had particularly well-developed experiences. In each case, the conversations were connected to the conflicts entailed by OV’s General Assembly, as well as to their possible resolution in future social movements.

1.3. Theoretical Overview: Gramsci’s “Philosophy of Praxis”

In the present section, I will explicate some of the most prominent concepts described in Antonio Gramsci’s most prominent work – namely, the *Prison Notebooks* (1971), which Gramsci wrote under conditions of censorship in a fascist jail. In particular, I aim to relate each of Gramsci’s central concepts to the broader, pedagogical mission that Gramsci attributed both to Marxist theory (which Gramsci labelled “the Philosophy of Praxis”) and to the communist party (which Gramsci referred to as the “modern prince”) (1971, p. 147, 331). Importantly, my goal here is not to defend or to criticize Gramscian concepts, but to provide them with a fair treatment that is sympathetic to Gramsci’s emancipatory project and to the historical context in which he was writing. As I will demonstrate throughout my thesis, I have no qualms about critiquing and reconstructing Gramsci’s insights so as to render them more useful to prefigurative activists.

We begin with the concept of “praxis,” which entails “the unity of theory and practice” – that is, a potentially revolutionary condition according to which an agent’s perspective comes to critique, clarify, and reflect the interests entailed by their everyday life activity (1971, p. 365). Gramsci’s emphasis on praxis drew him to Marx’s earlier, more explicitly humanist works, which placed far more emancipatory and theoretical weight on creative human agency than on the mechanistic laws underlying economic growth and crisis (while never going so far as to discount these more structural and

“economist” factors tout court). In his second and eighth theses on the materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx (1978) exemplified this emphasis on human practice:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man [sic!] must prove the truth - i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question...Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice (p. 144-145).

According to the Marx of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, any account of human interaction that abstracts from agents' concrete practices is either “scholastic” or “mystical,” and fails to provide an adequate basis for a critical and emancipatory theory.

I have introduced Marx's views on the unity of theory and practice because Gramsci developed most of his central ideas in an attempt to theorize the relationship between these two, interrelated moments of praxis. Take, for instance, Gramsci's concept of the “contradictory consciousness,” which problematizes the frequent disconnect that exists between agents' theories (i.e. their discourses and world views) and their practices (i.e. the structural interests possessed by (for instance) workers or peasants vis-à-vis capitalist relations of production). I consider the following passage on the contradictory consciousness to be the most important in Gramsci's oeuvre, so I will quote it at length:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, with varying efficacy [sic] but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity (p. 333).

Gramsci's prison writings sought to address the implications of this contradictory divide between ideology and practical activity; between the revolutionary interests entailed by workers' everyday experiences and the oft-reactionary ways in which workers conceptualize these same experiences through ideologies propagated by elites.

Gramsci introduced his theory of hegemony in order to problematize how dominant classes exert ideological influence through the institutions of civil society, thereby subverting a population's revolutionary inclinations by foreclosing their development of praxis and critical consciousness. By "civil society," Gramsci implied the "ensemble of organizations commonly called "private"" – that is, the universities, churches, families, and other institutions that socialize individuals into a common culture and ideology (p. 306). In nations with a prominent civil society – such as the northern Italy of Gramsci's day - these institutions "constitute for the art of politics as it were the "trenches" and the permanent fortifications" that impede attempts by revolutionary movements to usurp the state apparatus (p. 233). According to this interpretation, civil society constitutes the arena in which rival parties vie for influence over the public's world view. Under the more developed civil societies characteristic of industrial capitalism and parliamentary democracy, revolutionary movements must first win this ideological battle over civil society (what Gramsci called the "War of Position") before attempting to forcibly overthrow state power (the "War of Manoeuvre") (p. 233-234).

Acting through civil society, dominant economic classes and their allies can achieve hegemony by propagating world-views that support the reproduction of a given political and economic order. Hegemony, therefore, implies the "permeation throughout civil society...of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it" (Boggs, 1978, p. 39). However, the dominant class's advantage within civil society is not a foregone conclusion; Gramsci (1971) claimed that a group of intellectuals, allied with the working classes and organized under a communist party, could engage in a War of Position by which the dominant ideologies and institutions of civil society could be challenged (p. 224).

Common to all hegemony is its basis in consent rather than coercion. For a ruling class to be truly hegemonic, it must derive its authority not primarily from violence or

trickery, but from a broad population's conscious and willing agreement with the hegemonic power and its policies. Consent thereby entails an element of compromise amongst any ruling class, which must sacrifice some of its own economic interests in order to satisfy the material needs of a wide proportion of the population (Gramsci, 1971, p. 205). Nevertheless, to Gramsci, "there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (p. 161). Here, Gramsci asserts the ultimate and necessary class-character of a ruling hegemonic regime. That is, although hegemony entails a wide alliance between various forces organized through civil society – what Gramsci would call an "historical bloc" (p. 137) - it ultimately congeals around a distinctly economic class that is defined by its relation to the means of production.

Gramsci drew an important distinction between civil society and what he labelled "political society," with the latter term comprising the formal legislative, juridical, military, and police apparatus affiliated with a given nation-state (p. 12). In contrast to civil society, political society relies upon violence and coercion to extract obedience from a population – for instance, through the use of legal sanctions or military force. Despite this important difference, Gramsci's distinction between civil society and political society is strictly an analytical one; ultimately, Gramsci subsumed both political and civil society under the more comprehensive term "the integral State," which includes both "dictatorship + hegemony" (that is, political society in conjunction with civil society) (p. 239). Gramsci's definition of the state therefore includes both consent and coercion; both the formal apparatus of government and the manifold universities, churches, families, labour unions, and other institutions that transmit (and contest) a ruling class's supportive ideology.

To Gramsci, the factor distinguishing communist from bourgeois hegemony had little to do with the consent/coercion dyad – Gramsci assumed the communist party would ultimately need to use force to usurp state power (p. 169-170) – but was rather rooted in a difference of pedagogical method. As we have seen, Gramsci attributes hegemony to the attempts, made by various groups, to propagate ideology through the institutions of civil society. To gain popular support, hegemonic ideologies must be

grounded in a society's diffuse, contradictory, and pre-existing body of unquestioned beliefs and values. Gramsci labeled the totality of these pre-reflexive societal beliefs "common sense." According to council communist and Gramsci scholar Carl Boggs (1978), "as all ruling elites seek to perpetuate their power, wealth, and status, they necessarily attempt to popularize their own philosophy, culture, morality, etc. and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things" (p. 39). Common sense results from the past interplay of these unquestioned ideological forces; it is a cultural artifact that comprises the sediments of past attempts - made by churches, nation-states, economic classes, and other social forces - to establish a hegemonic dominance presented as eternal, natural, and inevitable.

To Gramsci, the communist party's central role - and the only characteristic that qualitatively distinguished it from bourgeois competitors - resided in the fact that communist intellectuals are able to combine their attempts to achieve ideological superiority with a distinct pedagogical responsibility. In particular, Gramsci maintained that communist intellectuals should strive to cultivate an "organic" relationship to the masses - that is, to share common backgrounds, languages, and customs with those whom the communist party was charged with organizing (1971, p. 5). The organic nature of communist intellectuals was intended as a bulwark against Soviet-style party bureaucracy, but Gramsci also considered it an educational tool by which party members might engage with and learn from subordinate classes:

This problem can and must be related to the modern way of considering educational doctrine and practice, according to which the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher. But the educational relationship should not be restricted to the field of the strictly "scholastic" relationships...Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship...One could say that the historical personality of an individual philosopher is also given by the active relationship which exists between him [sic!] and the cultural environment he is proposing to modify. The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism. It is his "teacher" (p. 349-350).

All attempts at hegemony are therefore educational and based on a particular interpretation of the pedagogical process. What distinguishes a bourgeois from a communist pedagogy, however, resides in the fact that

A philosophy of praxis [Gramsci's synonym for "Marxism"] cannot but present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise, as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world). First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of "common sense," basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that "everyone" is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity (p. 330-331).

Gramsci's claim that "everyone is a philosopher" is central to his revolutionary theory, according to which "philosophy" does not merely imply high theory or university-based academics, but rather the ways in which average people reflect upon their everyday life experiences. Generally speaking, these experiences face individuals as a scattered, arbitrary, and internally-contradictory common sense - the sediment, as we have seen, of past attempts at hegemony. Gramsci claimed that the communist party and its organic intellectuals should root their attempts to construct hegemony within this popular common sense - not so as to mold it into an oppressive ideology, but in order to help enable workers and other oppressed subjects to critically approach common sense and to identify what, in its milieu of contradictory beliefs and values, truly reflected the interests of the popular classes (Ibid.).

Gramsci uses the term "good sense" to describe the forms of common sense that have been distilled, through the pedagogical relationship between organic intellectuals and the popular masses, into a rational, coherent, and critical world view (p. 328). To Gramsci, good sense therefore comprises "a rational, not an arbitrary, will, which is realized in so far as it corresponds to objective historical necessities" - that is, to the structural dynamics and interests entailed by the means of production (p. 345-346). Based on these assertions, we can clarify the fundamental distinction between bourgeois and proletarian manifestations of hegemony. A bourgeois hegemony pursues the pedagogical relationship in such a way as to manipulate a population's unquestioned common sense, thereby obfuscating the structural interests of subordinate classes. Inversely, a proletarian hegemony attempts to facilitate the critical capacities of oppressed subjects, thereby enabling their good sense and helping them to clarify the structural interests - or, in Gramsci's parlance, the "historical necessities" - that reflect their everyday experiences as workers, peasants, etc. As such, good sense is conjoined

to a distinctly revolutionary world view – one that derives from the critical capacities of a subordinate population and its endogenous cohort of organic intellectuals.

1.4. My Argument and a Chapter-by-Chapter Summary

I frame my thesis as a response to Richard J.F. Day's attempt to discredit Gramscian theory in his book *Gramsci is Dead* (2005). Within, Day paints a picture of Gramsci as a Marxist-Leninist whose views regarding "hegemony" are fundamentally oriented towards conquering state power through centralized and authoritarian means (p. 65). According to this perspective,

while [Gramsci] does not consistently specify the required order in which a dominant fundamental group must achieve both hegemony in civil society and state power in political society, it is clear that for Gramsci both are *necessary but not sufficient* conditions of a successful social transformation. No hegemony without state power; no state power without hegemony (p. 63).

Day considers this approach to be diametrically opposed to what he labels "the newest social movements," which he characterizes as "[oriented] to direct action and the construction of alternatives to state and corporate forms" (p. 18). For Day, these newest social movements are fundamentally extricated from civil society and its corresponding basis in consensus; indeed, "civil society, as we currently know it, is not only superfluous, but dangerous, as it presumes and reinforces both the state and corporate forms..." (p. 213). As such, Day suggests that prefigurative social movements bypass political and civil society, instead creating "spaces, places, or *topias*" in the "here and now" that prefigure dominant institutions rather than placing demands upon them (p. 216). With the exception of two scattered and unproblematized paragraphs throughout *Gramsci is Dead* – paragraphs in which Day admits the need for prefigurative movements to engage in some degree of hegemonic change (p. 176) and to problematize "state and corporate forms" (p. 215) – these "topias" would seem to exist more-or-less independently from macro-scale institutions and ideologies of domination. Indeed, there is little discussion, throughout *Gramsci is Dead*, regarding how the institutions of political and civil society provide a durable and constraining institutional environment that forecloses the capacity for activists in the newest social movements to fully realize their prefigurative aspirations.

Provided Day's arguments were sound, then I would certainly agree with his conclusions regarding Gramsci's irrelevance vis-a-vis prefigurative social movements. However, there are at least two problems with Day's line of argumentation. Firstly, Day's arguments make far too absolute an identification between hegemony and state power – an identification that Gramsci did not share. In his book *Gramsci's Political Thought* (1981), Gramscian scholar Joseph Femia responds to an interpretation of hegemony similar to the one that Day provides in *Gramsci is Dead*:

This interpretation is both unjustified and unjustifiable. When Gramsci refers to hegemony in his *Quaderni* [the *Prison Notebooks*], it is almost invariably clear from the context that he conceives it purely in terms of ideological leadership, and that he wishes to counterpoise it to the moment of force. Even when he speaks of “political hegemony” or “political leadership,” he undoubtedly means the *consensual aspect* of political control (p. 25).

In *Gramsci's Political Thought*, Femia provides far more textual evidence to support this interpretation of hegemony than Day offers throughout the two hundred and seventeen pages of *Gramsci is Dead*, in which Gramsci receives no more than eighteen indexed page references – references which, moreover, almost exclusively appear in the form of decontextualized, unquoted citations. If, following Femia, we therefore accept that hegemony can be analytically decoupled from state power, then there is nothing in Gramsci's writing that prevents us from theorizing “hegemony” in contexts radically different from the mass party-based movements and state-oriented politics emphasized in the *Prison Notebooks*.

As such, Gramsci can at least *hypothetically* be applied to prefigurative activism; the question of why activists should want to do so leads me to my second criticism of *Gramsci is Dead*. In particular, Day's conception of civil society as “superfluous” does not match Gramsci's own usage of terms like “civil society” or “hegemony.” For Gramsci, civil society comprised the institutional realm in which actors competed to attain ideological dominance through hegemony (Gramsci, 1971, p. 306). Insofar as we grant that hegemony is an ideological force that influences agents' behaviors at the level of their pre-reflexive “common sense” (p. 333), then we cannot simply speak of civil society as being superfluous. This point can be clarified with reference to two examples that may prove more familiar to post-structuralist thinkers such as Richard Day: namely, Michel Foucault's concept of “disciplinary power” (1977, p. 221-223), and Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari's notion of "molecular fascism" (1987, p. 214-215). Each of these concepts refers to a form of power that affects individuals in a manner that bypasses their reflexive awareness and that forecloses (though never absolutely) their desire for resistance. As such, the act of labelling these forces "superfluous" risks a contradiction; in the very act of dismissing them as irrelevant, we may very well be articulating disciplinary power or molecular fascism in a manner that escapes our awareness and our capacity for critique. Arguments concerning the irrelevance of civil society and hegemony are problematic for the same reason.

Given the subversive nature of hegemony and civil society, treating prefigurative social movements as if they are somehow extricated from these forces is both indefensible and strategically misguided, as it treats an unrealized goal (an institutional and ideological environment conducive to prefigurative politics) as if it were a foregone conclusion. Macro-scale institutions and ideologies of patriarchy, white supremacy, and statism were rampant at Occupy Vancouver, and impinged upon activists' perspectives and interpretive frames in a manner that was often deeply engrained and unquestioned. Rather than speaking of these forces as superfluous, it behooves activists to develop concepts that can help clarify how and when such ideologies encroach upon prefigurative social movements, thereby foreclosing their emancipatory potential. Until activists can speak of these ideological influences as having been truly exorcised from movements like Occupy, treating them as superfluous in theory will simply serve to obfuscate their continuing influence in practice. As such, to the extent that oppressive ideologies encroach upon prefigurative social movements, there are excellent *prima facie* reasons to revive rather than to bury Gramscian theory, as concepts such as "hegemony," "common sense," and "good sense" stand to clarify the problematic ways in which civil society constantly impedes upon prefigurative activism.

This is not to say that I advocate applying Gramscian theory to prefigurative social movements unaltered. As an anarchist, I would certainly agree that Gramsci – or, at least, the Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks* - overemphasized state-oriented change at the expense of addressing prefigurative strategy. However, I contest both the factual accuracy, as well as the strategic desirability, of the dichotomy that Day draws between prefigurative forms of activism and those that can be theorized with reference to Gramscian concepts such as "hegemony." As such, my thesis forwards an alternative,

anarchism-inspired approach to Gramscian theory, which I will label “anarcho-Gramscianism.” This term entails not a totalizing dismissal of Gramsci’s work, but rather a need to reconstruct his concepts in a manner that challenges their traditional emphasis on state-, class-, and party-centric forms of social change. Accomplishing this act of theoretical reconstruction – along with a number of ancillary objectives, such as the tentative establishment of a critical realist and dialectical framework conducive to prefigurative activists’ analytical needs - constitutes the central goal of the present work.

The arguments of my thesis will proceed as follows. Having introduced my research in the present chapter, Chapter Two will address the topic of "regional ontology" - a term that refers to the assumptions, latent in any social theory, regarding what entities possess causal or explanatory significance. My arguments in Chapter Two will be driven by an approach to ontology labelled “critical realism” – a theoretical framework that seeks to clarify A) how objective and material structures generate causal effects, and B) how these causal effects are interpreted by the subjective perspectives of distinct, socially-situated agents. After explaining critical realism’s conceptual framework with reference to the OV General Assembly, I will demonstrate how critical realism can help activists revise Gramscian and neo-Gramscian state theory so as to render it applicable to the decision-making institutions characteristic of prefigurative social movements.

Chapter Three comprises a brief intermezzo, in which I will introduce the vast and internally-diverse theory of “dialectical materialism,” while responding to some of its critics from within prefigurative social movement theory. Building on this definition of dialectics, Chapter Four will explore the formative interconnections shared by the terms constituting three binaries long-theorized by dialectical theorists – namely, that of necessity and contingency, that of abstract and concrete universality, and that of positivity and negativity. In exploring these binaries, my aim is A) to contest that their constituent terms can be dichotomized into separate, ontologically distinct entities, B) to illustrate how Gramscian concepts can help activists apply these dialectical categories to prefigurative politics, and C) to demonstrate that dialectical materialism can be applied to prefigurative social movements without reference to class essentialism.

Chapter Five will demonstrate the utility of my conceptual framework by using it to critique two existing theories of prefiguration, both of which contrast markedly with the critical realist, dialectical, and Gramscian approach developed herein. In particular, I will critique A) Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (2001) discourse-theoretical interpretation of Gramscian theory, and B) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000; 2004; 2009; 2012) immanentist approach to the "multitude." After reviewing and critiquing both theories, I will argue that their major analytical shortcomings derive from their common tendency to evacuate human agency and social practice of any explanatory or causal power, instead reducing all social dynamics to the mechanistic workings of underlying discursive or economic structures. I will argue that this dismissal of human agency compels both theories to embrace a mono-causal approach to prefigurative politics that fails to theorize many of the causal factors responsible for the General Assembly's social dynamics. Finally, and by way of conclusion, I will issue a call for university-based social movement researchers to ground their theories in the concrete and socially-situated experiences of activists - a project that conflicts with the conservative interests enforced by the neoliberal university, but which is necessary if university-based social theory is to prove its relevance to prefigurative activism.

1.5. A Note on Style, Audience, and Privilege

Before turning to my discussion of ontology in Chapter Two, an important stylistic proviso is in order. I have, throughout my thesis, endeavored to use clear language, to adequately define each of my central concepts, to make frequent use of empirical examples, and to explicitly problematize my ontological and conceptual assumptions. On the one hand, my justification for this stylistic approach hinges on a question of audience; I have written my thesis not only for a university-based readership, but also for fellow activists, many of whom were active in Occupy Vancouver and who witnessed its problems (and its many triumphs) first-hand. In my desire to share my conclusions with these activists, several of whom contributed directly to my research, I have assumed a relatively low pre-existing knowledge of sociological concepts like "social structure" and "discourse;" indeed, much of my emphasis on a clearly-defined ontology should be viewed in this light.

But there is another reason why I have attempted to render my arguments concise and transparent. As a white, cis-male¹ activist who is formally educated and who comes from an upper-middle class suburban upbringing, my conceptual and analytical standpoint is based on privileges granted to me by the same institutions of patriarchy and white supremacy subject to my thesis's critique. I consider myself a feminist and anti-racist ally; as such, it would be irresponsible for me to assume that, in writing about the patriarchy and white supremacy prevalent in the OV General Assembly, I have somehow bracketed these same sources of privilege when it comes to my own perspective. In attempting to articulate my arguments and conceptual definitions transparently, I hope to have clarified any race-, class-, and gender-specific assumptions that have escaped my attempts at self-reflection. I therefore welcome any critiques that clarify how the aforementioned privileges have influenced my conclusions in ways that I have failed to notice or problematize. Indeed, I urge readers not to view my arguments as final, pre-packaged products, but rather as potential catalysts for a critical conversation - one that will hopefully continue long after the present thesis has been submitted.

¹ The terms "cis-gender," "cis-male," and "cis-female" are common phrases amongst prefigurative activists. According to gender theorists Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook (2009), "'Cisgender'...refer[s] to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity" (p. 461). By contrast, transgender individuals enact genders that do *not* correlate with their socially-ascribed gender. Because transgender activists are often marginalized or excluded, even within the context of progressive and feminist social movements, the prefix "cis-" entails a certain degree of privilege amongst activists.

Chapter 2.

#Occupy Ontology: A Critical Realist and Neo-Gramscian Approach to the Occupy Vancouver General Assembly

Much of my thesis revolves around the importance that ontology holds in relation to critical and emancipatory social theory. Indeed, my reasons for proclaiming the continuing relevance of Gramscian theory, and my corresponding critique of many existing theories of prefigurative politics, relate directly to ontological factors. What, then, is "ontology?" And why should politically-engaged theorists of social movements care about this seemingly technical term? In its most literal sense, ontology refers to the "study of being." Critical realist Dave Elder-Vass (2012) takes this definition to imply the study of "what kinds of things are operating, how they can exist, and how they can be causally influential" (Ch. 1, Sec. 1, Para. 2). Elder-Vass (2010) has labelled this technical definition of ontology "metaphysical ontology," and distinguishes it from a second, more precise meaning of the term, which he labels "domain-specific ontology" or, alternatively, "regional ontology" (p. 68). These latter terms refer not to ontology in its general, "metaphysical" sense, but to the way in which particular social theories attribute explanatory significance to certain entities, while deeming others to be theoretically irrelevant.

In this sense, prefigurative activists can also be said to articulate a regional ontology through which we demarcate certain processes and entities - e.g. "gender," "class," "consensus-based decision-making" - as possessing explanatory relevance vis-a-vis prefigurative politics. These ontological assumptions inform, at a very deep and often unquestioned level, the conclusions and strategies that drive our activism. As such, it is important to articulate, in explicit and contestable terms, the ontological assumptions that motivate our attempts to produce activist-oriented theory. Such is the broad goal of

the present chapter, in which I will map several of the entities that exerted a causal influence in relation to the Occupy Vancouver General Assembly. I assert that these causal forces are fundamental to prefigurative politics, and must therefore be theorized – or at least problematized and acknowledged – by any theory of prefiguration relevant to activists’ concrete practices.

To this end, my arguments in the present chapter will proceed as follows: First, I will introduce the central principles entailed by “critical realism,” my preferred approach to ontology in its broader, “metaphysical” sense. Secondly, I will introduce the concept of “social structure,” and will use it to demonstrate how categories central to Gramscian state theory can be fruitfully applied to the OV General Assembly in its capacity as a political institution. Thirdly, I will elaborate the neo-Gramscian state theories articulated by Nicos Poulantzas (1978) and Bob Jessop (1990). Applying these theories to the General Assembly, I will show how OV’s decision-making process demonstrated a distinct “strategic-selectivity” according to which certain identities, dispositions, and practices were systematically privileged over others, thereby generating hierarchies within OV’s formally non-hierarchical institutions. By the chapter’s conclusion, I hope to have outlined a regional ontology of Occupy Vancouver – one that can serve as a concrete foundation on which to judge the strategic and analytical value underlying theories of prefigurative politics.

2.1. Critical Realism and the Emergentist Approach to Structure and Agency

In the present section, I will summarize “critical realism” – a diverse approach to ontology that has been applied to both the natural and social sciences. The notion of “causality” is central to critical realism’s ontology, according to which an object can only be described as real if it exerts some form of actual or latent causal effect on its environment (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 45-47). These causes, in turn, depend on the structured character of an objective and material reality, which generates causal force through a series of interrelated variables. These include: A) “entities” that consist of B) “parts,” which, when structured in a particular way, trigger a C) “mechanism” of action that in turn generates D) “emergent properties.” These emergent properties “[are] not

possessed by any of the parts individually and...would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them” (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 17). Dave Elder-Vass (2010) uses the example of a water molecule to illustrate these concepts:

The properties of water are clearly different from those of its components, oxygen and hydrogen, when these are not combined with each other in the specific form that constitutes water. We can, for example, put out a fire with water, but the outcome would be very different if we tried to do the same with oxygen and hydrogen (p. 5).

According to Elder-Vass’s example, a water molecule (an “entity”) only exists as such because its atomic components (that entity’s “parts”) are structured in a certain way. This structure entails a form of chemical bonding (the “mechanism” that is responsible for structuring the entity and enabling it to cohere), which provides water with its characteristic lack of flammability (one of many “emergent properties” possessed by a water molecule vis-a-vis its constituent atoms). This emergent property would not be realized if either A) water’s constituent atoms existed in isolation, or B) these atoms were structured according to a mechanism that did not entail their chemical bonding into a common water molecule.

Importantly, a structure’s generation of emergent properties is an objective process – it implies a causal, and not a conceptual or logical, relationship amongst a structure’s parts. The emergent properties of water do not, after all, occur merely because we think about them; rather, the realization of water’s emergent properties depends upon a chemical process that is irreducible to the discourses, interpretive frames, and perspectives of human agents. As such, a further contribution of critical realism derives from the clear analytical distinction it posits between subjectivity and objectivity; between “transitive” and “intransitive” causes:

Critical realists...argue that the self can obtain knowledge of a reality that is separate from our representations of it. This does not mean that we have a direct access to a manifest truth, but instead it means that we have access to reality via fallible theories...As knowledge claims are fallible, the best we can do is improve our interpretations of reality, rather than seek a definitive, finished “Truth” (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 1-2).

Here, critical realist Justin Cruickshank mentions three central principles of critical realism: namely, A) that agents can posit an objective reality that is irreducible to human knowledge, B) that we can never know this reality in the form of absolute Truth, but that C) we can improve our knowledge about this reality by testing, applying, and improving fallible theories that make claims regarding how reality is structured so as to generate particular emergent properties.

The unavoidable imperfection of human knowledge is a central tenet of critical realism. The generalizations that agents make about objective reality are mediated by subjective discourses and perspectives, which invariably frame how we view the material world. Indeed, agents' knowledge of objective truth – while improvable through experimentation and critical inquiry – can never be decoupled from our subjective standpoints, which are themselves embroiled in relations of power and privilege. In their *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* (1997), Danermark et. al. explain this subjective dimension of reality:

...we must always have our starting point in the concepts provided by our language world, and in that we are always also prisoners of the concepts; and there is no way to escape from this prison...Consequently, it is no use trying. Taking one's starting point from critical realism instead, one will find the solution, namely to become aware of and see the relation between language and reality, that is to see the intrinsic and mutual relation between concept/knowledge, the practices that we as human beings are involved in, and the world our practice is dealing with (p. 30).

Danermark et. al. describe the linguistic and conceptual dimension of reality as something that agents cannot escape. Nevertheless, agents retain the important capacity to problematize this subjective dimension by critiquing social practice and by evaluating the institutions within which practice is constantly enmeshed.

The capacity for individuals to evaluate and critique institutional norms implies our capacity to act according to reasons that are themselves irreducible to underlying, objective causes. For most critical realists, these reasons possess a causal efficacy that forms the basis for human agency. In his *The Possibilities of Naturalism* (2005), Roy Bhaskar argues that "intentional human behavior is caused, and that it is always caused by reasons, and that it is only because it is caused by reasons that it is properly characterized as intentional. The agent (and others) may or may not be aware of the

reasons that cause his/her intentional behavior” (p. 89). In Bhaskar’s framework, these reasons are deeply enmeshed in pre-existing norms and beliefs, but are not reducible to any of these factors (p. 101-103). As such, "the social sciences must seek to understand those reasons, as advocates of interpretive sociology and hermeneutics have argued...However, they are only co-determining causes and must always operate in conjunction with a complex of other factors in determining our actual behavior" (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 98). Agency is, in other words, an immensely complex emergent property; subjective reasons are but one of the many factors responsible for causing human practice. A comprehensive account of agency needs to consider not only agents' conscious and sub-conscious reasons, but also their normative environment, which is determined by the agent's positioning within various “social structures.” It is to this topic that I now turn.

2.2. The General Assembly as a Political Structure

Thus far, I have limited my discussion of critical realism to what I will label "natural structures" - e.g. a water molecule – and have treated human agency only in the abstract, severed from its social and institutional environment. But people do not exist in isolation; they interact, and when their interactions generate emergent properties, they come to constitute distinctly *social* structures. Whereas natural structures are composed of non-human parts – for instance, oxygen and hydrogen - the emergent properties of social structures “depend on the people who are their parts and on the interactions between people as the mechanisms that produce their powers... (2012, Ch. 2, Sec. 3, Para. 7). As such, anything from a classroom, to a general assembly, to a nation-state can constitute a social structure, so long as its component agents interact in a coordinated manner that generates an emergent property.

Social structures only function if their agents' practices demonstrate some form of predictable pattern. The OV General Assembly, for instance, only facilitated a decision-making process because its participants shared certain behavioral expectations, such as those regarding the General Assembly's formal rules and its informal behavioral guidelines. If activists had interpreted and enforced these rules in an unpredictable manner, OV could never have constituted a social structure, as the practices of GA

participants would have lacked any coordination. As a short-hand for the behavioral expectations constitutive of social structures, I will use the term "social norms," which Elder-Vass (2010) describes thus:

By normative social practices I mean regularised practices encouraged by dispositions or beliefs about appropriate ways of behaving that are shared by a group of people. There is a vast range of such practices, including those sanctioned by legal systems...religious beliefs...rule systems...or cultures...These various types of rules (or their tacit equivalent, in which the practice is not understood or transmitted in explicitly verbal terms) may be called *norms* (p. 116-117).

As it stands, this definition raises more questions than it answers. What, after all, are social norms, and in what form do they exist? Are norms merely subjective, mental, and "virtual" phenomena, thereby reducible to the knowledge that agents possess of them? Indeed, this is the approach taken by sociologist Anthony Giddens in his influential *The Constitution of Society* (1984, p. 21-24). By contrast, I argue for a more critical realist interpretation, according to which norms - and social structures more broadly - are not merely subjective, but instead manifest a durable, objective reality. To theorize this objective component of norms and their corresponding social structures, Dave Elder-Vass rejuvenates sociologist Georg Simmel's concept of "normative circles," which, in Elder-Vass's (2012) interpretation, refers to

a group of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm. Such groups are social entities with people as their parts, and because of the ways in which the members of such groups interact (a *mechanism*) they have the causal power to produce a tendency in individuals to follow standardized practices (2012, Ch. 2, Sec. 4, Para. 1).

Norm circles were rife at Occupy Vancouver, and formed the bedrock underlying the many norms, rules, and behavioral expectations characteristic of the General Assembly process. If an activist misinterpreted a hand signal, interrupted a speaker out of turn, or became verbally abusive towards another activist, the GA's corresponding norm circles were waiting in the wings to normalize and rectify the decision-making practices of the deviant activist in question. Furthermore, these norm circles possessed a reality irreducible to any given activist's subjective awareness, and exerted a causal effect regardless of whether deviant activists were aware of the norms being broken. As such, norm circles constituted the objective, normative foundation upon which OV's social

structures were based, and they coordinated the actions of activists so as to generate the General Assembly's emergent properties.

Using Elder-Vass's terminology, we can begin to piece together a regional ontology of the OV General Assembly, thereby demarcating the explanatory factors that a theory of prefiguration should competently address. To initiate this ontology, I will briefly identify the entities, parts, mechanisms, and emergent properties that were influential at the General Assembly. I posit that the *entity* under consideration is the GA itself, which structured the decision-making practices of OV activists. At minimum, any list of the *parts* composing the GA would need to include A) individual activists, B) the spatial and material infrastructure of the tent city, including the elevated Art Gallery stage and the surrounding tent city, and C) any material resources relevant to the GA, such as the electric microphone frequently placed atop the stage and accessed by facilitators or activists with announcements. The structured interaction between these various parts was ensured by activists' enforcement of social norms, as formalized in the rules that regulated activists' deliberations and decision-making practices. These norms constituted the *mechanism* responsible for patterning activists' decision-making processes in [relatively] predictable fashion. Finally, the General Assembly coordinated activists' decision-making practices so as to generate several *emergent properties*, among the most important of which entailed the creation and enforcement of normatively-binding decisions (more on which below). Among their many uses, these decisions provided the behavioral norms that regulated activists' interactions within the tent city.

Thus far, my account of the GA has remained simplistic, treating the General Assembly as a social structure in which all OV activists operated with similar normative expectations. However, not every activist performed identical roles vis-a-vis the General Assembly; rather, GA participants were prescribed a distinct set of norms by which activists, in their capacity as "role-incumbents," were expected to abide. As such, the GA constituted what Elder-Vass has labelled an "organization" – that is, a complex form of social structure defined by A) its reliance upon a division of labour in the form of specialized roles, and B) its capacity to structure the actions of role-incumbents such that their coordinated activity engenders emergent properties in the form of intended outcomes (p. 153-155). In characterizing the General Assembly as an organization, I

would therefore need to identify both its roles, as well as any emergent properties that these roles facilitated by normalizing and coordinating the actions of role-incumbents.

By way of roles, there were two that were most relevant within the OV General Assembly: the role of "facilitator," and that of "participant." Each of these roles entailed distinct responsibilities, behavioral expectations, and degrees of access to the GA's resources (such as its electric microphone, or the ability to speak from atop the Art Gallery stage). The "facilitator" was expected to moderate an efficient, inclusive, and emotionally safe deliberative process in which activists could formulate the everyday policies of Occupy Vancouver. This is not to say that facilitators always performed according to these expectations; it is merely to say that, when facilitators failed to do so, the GA was less effective at generating its emergent property regarding the creation and enforcement of normatively-binding decisions. By contrast, the role of the GA "participant" entailed engaging in the consensus decision-making process in a manner that did not compromise the aforementioned deliberative criteria of inclusivity and efficiency. The quantity of participants would vary between GAs, but the average General Assembly would include between thirty to several hundred participants, whose decision-making practices were typically moderated by a team of two facilitators.

Having illustrated some of the prominent roles influential at the OV General Assembly, I am in the position to explore the emergent properties that these roles made possible, thereby clarifying what kind of entity the GA comprised. I argue that we can define the General Assembly as a "polity," my definition for which is influenced by the critical realist and neo-Gramscian Bob Jessop's (1990) definition of the nation-state, the "core" of which he defines as comprising "a distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their common interest or general will... (p. 341). Following Jessop's definition, we can identify several state-like characteristics within the decision-making structures that constituted the OV General Assembly. *First*, the GA enabled, as one of its emergent properties, the deliberation, creation, and enforcement of normatively-binding decisions. That these decisions were primarily enforced with reference to ideological and ethical criteria – rather than with reference to punitive sanctions and the threat of violence – is a point that I will problematize below. *Secondly*, the norms passed by the GA were applicable only within

the confines of what we might call the GA's corresponding "society" – that is, the aggregate of social structures that constituted Occupy Vancouver, including its tent city economy, its political structure of the General Assembly, and its ideology-producing structures such as the OV Media Tent. These structures possessed a clearly demarcated geographic limit, beyond which they were able to exert little normative influence; for instance, rules such as "do not smoke" were limited to the OV tent city, and quickly lost their normatively-binding force once activists passed beyond the confines of the Art Gallery grounds. *Thirdly*, we can speak of a "common interest" or "general will" at Occupy Vancouver, which the GA attempted to represent through its consensus decision-making process. Indeed, much of the GA's emphasis on consent – which entailed the capacity for even one activist to "block" and veto a proposal – can be read as an attempt to ensure that OV's general will embodied as accurate a reflection of activists' opinions as possible. When the GA failed to adequately represent this general will – for instance, when the predominantly white and cis-male facilitation teams moderated in a manner that reflected the interests, experiences, and opinions of OV's more privileged activists – the General Assembly would often experience various forms of interpersonal conflict, inhibiting the GA's operation as a polity. For each of these reasons, we can ascertain a certain similarity between the structures traditionally identified with the state, and those articulated by the OV General Assembly – whatever their many important differences.

Insofar as the OV General Assembly embodied a polity, I submit that we can usefully analyze the GA as an expression of what Gramsci labelled a "State." Far from limiting this concept to describing the formal governmental apparatus, Gramsci conceptualized the State "integrally," such that "State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion..." (p. 263). Although I have defined these terms in my introduction, a brief clarification is in order. On the one hand, Gramsci spoke of "civil society" as comprising activities that are "at present classified as legally neutral...[civil society] operates without "sanctions" or compulsory "obligations," but nevertheless exerts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morality, etc." (p. 242). Elsewhere, Gramsci writes of civil society as being "spontaneous and free (more strictly ethical) in those zones in which "coercion" is not a State affair, but is effected by public opinion,

moral climate, etc. (p. 195-196). In these passages, "civil society" is identified with modes of normative enforcement – even, confusingly, with forms of “coercion” - that are ideological or ethical in nature, and which are therefore consensual and enforceable without reference to the punitive sanctions characteristic of the formal governmental apparatus. By contrast, Gramsci associates "political society" with "the apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively" (p. 12). As such, “political society” refers to the coercive institutions embodied by the formal government, the laws of which command obedience regardless of agents’ ideological or ethical consent.

Gramsci drew a clear analytical distinction between consent and coercion, between hegemony and the formal government, and between political society and civil society. Nevertheless, Gramsci argued that both political and civil society were necessary to the State’s operation, and maintained that consent and coercion always coincided in the practices of the modern state and political party (p. 124). As such, the *Prison Notebooks* spend little time theorizing prefigurative polities such as Occupy Vancouver, which, I will argue, comprise a civil society decoupled from political society and its corresponding basis in punitive sanctions. Indeed, such a divide between political and civil society escapes Gramsci’s tendency to pair these two moments of State power.

Nevertheless, I argue that Gramsci's framework has much to offer prefigurative activists, as it provides tools that clarify how even consensual political communities – i.e. those of civil society - can conceal hierarchies of power and privilege. As such, I posit that Gramsci's theoretical shortcomings are better reconstructed than abandoned. I further assert that critical realism can facilitate this reconstructive work by clarifying how Gramsci’s concepts might be rendered applicable to prefigurative activism. Take, for example, the binary of "coercion/consent" and that of "political society/civil society." Gramsci tends to conflate these two sets of terms, such that civil society is identified with consent (but not with coercion), whereas political society is identified with coercion (but not with consent) (p. 263). Given how he has conflated these two conceptual pairings, Gramsci’s formulation obscures how civil society relies upon forms of coercion that are generated not by a political society, but (for instance) by institutions of patriarchy and white privilege, each of which rely upon expressions of violence that transcend state-sanctioned authority.

Critical realist concepts can help clarify how these terms might be uncoupled so as to better theorize the forms of extra-statist coercion evident in polities like the OV General Assembly. On the one hand, both "consent" and "coercion" refer to what, in critical realist parlance, are labelled *mechanisms*. They comprise different ways of ensuring that social norms are adhered to - either by means of agents' consensual commitment or due to their fear of punitive sanctions - thereby patterning agents' practices in a manner that generates emergent properties. By contrast, "political society" and "civil society" refer not to mechanisms, but to *entities* - that is, to social structures that generate distinct forms of emergent property. According to a critical realist perspective, we might define a "political society" as the aggregate of social structures responsible for generating a society's laws in a manner enforceable through formal and coercive means. Inversely, "civil society" might refer to the ensemble of social structures that generate, by way of their emergent properties, a greater degree of consensual commitment to the ethical and ideological norms that characterize a particular society.

Having defined Gramsci's concepts in critical realist terms, I assert the following conclusions regarding the OV General Assembly, which I will subsequently elaborate and defend:

Firstly, the social structures of the GA constituted an expression of civil society. As such, the formal decisions passed by the General Assembly derived their normative influence from consensus – that is, from activists' ideological and ethical convictions. Although the GA passed normatively-binding rules, these rules were followed not because OV activists feared punitive sanctions or physical coercion, but because activists respected the ideals upon which the OV General Assembly was based. Indeed, there were few, if any, formally codified sanctions that could have enforced the rules passed by the General Assembly in a manner that relied upon coercion.

Secondly, although the OV General Assembly constituted a civil society - the formal rules of which were enforced consensually - the GA's decision-making process nevertheless relied upon the mechanism of coercion (as well as that of consent). Indeed, as I will demonstrate below, there were many barriers that delimited access to the GA's political process, and these barriers exerted a normative effect that was A) irreducible to activists' consent, and B) predicated on the threat of punitive sanctions, often in the form

of gender policing expressed through verbal harassment. As a result, the norms that the GA *did* produce – though enforced by consensual means once passed - often reflected a decision-making process that articulated the interests and perspectives of the tent city's more privileged activists.

Thirdly, given the first two conclusions, we can deduce that most of the coercive normative mechanisms that motivated GA participants were not endogenous to the prefigurative structures of the General Assembly – which were equitable and based on consensus - but were instead "smuggled in" from dominant, macro-scale structures that constituted the institutional context in which Occupy Vancouver was deeply enmeshed. As a description of these macro-scale structures, I turn to the words of Uri Gordon (2008) - an anarchist, activist, and theorist of prefigurative politics:

The systematic nature of domination is often expressed in reference to a number of overarching "forms," "systems," or "regimes" of domination - impersonal sets of rules regulating relationships between people - rules which are not autonomously constituted by those individuals placed within the relationship (including the dominating side), prominent examples of which are the wage system, patriarchy, and white supremacy (the latter two terms are preferred here to "sexism" and "racism" because they refer to defining features of social relations rather than to individual persons' attitudes of prejudice and bigotry) (p. 33).

In relation to Occupy Vancouver, any list of relevant "regimes of domination" would also include the state institutions entailed by the Vancouver and B.C. governments, their corresponding police forces, and mainstream media outlets. Each of these durable, macro-scale social structures played a major part in constraining Occupy Vancouver activists in their attempts at prefiguration – attempts that were constantly foreclosed by activists' tendency to enact problematic norms of patriarchy, white supremacy, and state-encouraged self-surveillance.² Through these structural intersections, the OV General Assembly internalized coercive mechanisms - for instance, those underlying gender policing - that were fundamentally anti-thetical to the General Assembly's more formal, codified, and acknowledged norms.

²Following the example of police forces in many North American cities, the Vancouver Police Department attempted to cultivate a climate of fear and distrust amongst OV activists by propagating divisive press releases intended to disrupt OV's internal affairs. For some of the more blatant examples of this tactic, see Vancouver Police Chief Chu's press releases on OV, which have been preserved at: mediareleases.vpd.ca/2011/11/08/update-occupy-vancouver-3/

Fourthly, given that OV's decision-making norms intersected with several, overlapping sources of structural coercion, the capacity for particular activists to influence the General Assembly was strongly determined by said activists' relative position within these various regimes of domination. As such, the social structures underlying the GA were *relational* - they exerted no causal power in the abstract, but were only expressed through the practices of distinct OV participants, each of whom related to the General Assembly in a manner largely determined by their gender, their ethnicity, or their class, as these various identities were determined by underlying, macro-scale social structures. Indeed, whether a given activist experienced a decision-making norm as coercive was itself a relational phenomenon – an argument that I will now elaborate.

2.3. A Relational Approach to Coercion and Consent

That the OV General Assembly relied upon consensus as a means to secure norm-abiding behavior is a truism; the very word “consensus” was a staple of what I will soon label the “Occupy Discourse,” and the GA’s decision-making procedures were explicitly designed so as to facilitate decisions that were amenable to every participating activist. Indeed, in the earlier phases of Occupy Vancouver, a single activist could delay or foreclose the passage of a proposal if they felt strongly enough to “block” it. As a result, the consensual aspect of OV was readily apparent. In the present section, I will therefore direct my attention towards the coercive aspects of the General Assembly. Phrased thus, this assertion might strike many readers as shocking; we are not used to thinking of the Occupy Movement as relying upon coercion, presumably because we are used to thinking of “coercion” as implying the forms of overt, physical violence typically associated with the formal governmental apparatus. However, there were many non-violent forms of coercion that patterned the decision-making practices of GA participants. Furthermore, insofar as these forms of coercion derived not from the endogenous structures of Occupy Vancouver, but from OV’s intersection with institutions like patriarchy, coercion confronted activists in different ways and to varying degrees, depending on their positioning within these macro-scale structures of domination.

As such, a structural analysis of the OV General Assembly needs to be approached “relationally,” in a manner that recognizes how the GA’s norms confronted

activists differently according to their diverse backgrounds, identities, and positions vis-à-vis macro-scale structures of oppression. To theorize this relational element of the General Assembly, I turn to the writings of two neo-Gramscian state theorists – Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop - who have developed and elaborated a "strategic-relational" approach to state power. Poulantzas (1978) first developed this relational approach to state theory in his later writings, as a result of his engagement with the works of French social theorist Michel Foucault. Building on Foucault's views regarding the relational character of power, Poulantzas articulated the following conception of the state:

As applied to social classes, power should be understood as the capacity of one or several classes to realize their specific interests. It is a concept designating the field of their struggle – that of the *relationship of force* and of the *relations* between one class and another; the concept of class interests thus designates the horizon of action occupied by a given class in relation to others. The capacity of one class to realize its interests is in opposition to the capacity (and interests) of other classes: *the field of power is therefore strictly relational*. The power of a particular class (the dominant class, for instance) does not refer to a substance which it holds in its hand: contrary to the old zero-sum conception, power is not a measurable quantity that the various classes share or exchange among one another. The power of a class refers above all to its objective place in economic, political, and ideological relations... The place of each class, and hence its power, is delimited (i.e. at once designated and limited) by the place of the other classes. Power is not then a quality attached to a class "in-itself," understood as a collection of agents, but depends on, and springs from, a relational system of material places occupied by particular agents (p. 147).

Poulantzas's formulation tends to assume a field of power informed predominantly by class relations, as between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or between competing elements within the bourgeoisie itself.³ By contrast, the critical realist and neo-Gramscian state theorist Bob Jessop (1990) has developed Poulantzas's relational conception of state theory in a less class-specific direction. Jessop has labelled this the "strategic-relational" approach to state theory, which views the state as a congealed social relation that exists through its capacity to exert "strategic selectivity" - a concept that highlights

³ See, for instance, Bob Jessop's criticisms of Poulantzas's class-reductivism in *Nicos Poulantzas: Marxist Theory and Political Strategy*, (1985, p. 178-190).

[the state's] differential impact on the capacity of different class(-relevant) forces to pursue their interests in different strategies over a given time horizon...[strategic selectivity] is not inscribed in the state system as such. Instead it depends on the relation between state structures and the strategies which various forces adopt towards it. The bias inscribed on the terrain of the state as a site of strategic action can only be understood as a bias relative to specific strategies pursued by specific forces to advance specific interests over a given time horizon in terms of a specific set of other forces each advancing their own interests through specific strategies. Particular forms of state privilege some strategies over others, privilege the access of some forces over others, some interests over others, some time horizons over others, some coalition possibilities over others (p. 10).

For both Jessop and Poulantzas, the state's existence is exhausted by these strategically-selective social relations. According to this perspective, power is not something possessed by state structures in the abstract. Rather, the state only exists because it is enacted and contested by concrete, socially-situated actors:

Everyday language sometimes depicts the state as a subject – the state does, or must do, this or that. Sometimes it treats the state as a thing – this economic class, social stratum, political party, or official caste uses the state to pursue its projects or interests. But the state is neither a subject nor a thing ... (2008, p. 3).

This does not mean that we cannot theorize the state in a form abstracted from concrete agents. We can certainly employ institutional analysis vis-a-vis a state's social structures; however, in doing so, we must acknowledge that our conclusions can only be articulated in the form of abstract "strategic-selectivities," whereby the state is shown to demonstrate certain amenabilities towards particular agents and strategies in relation to others. Any account that aspires to anything more than an abstract conception of state structures can only be generated if theorists acknowledge the specific agents, strategies, interests, etc., that constitute the state as a relation of forces in a given spatial and temporal context.

Having articulated the strategic-relational approach to state theory, I will now elaborate three, deeply interrelated forms of selectivity that were central to the political dynamics of Occupy Vancouver. Each of these selectivities privileged (or penalized) certain agents and strategies, thereby conditioning the GA's normative environment such that certain voices and identities came to dominate the General Assembly. While each of these forms of selectivity was ultimately derived from non-violent forms of coercion – they certainly were not reducible to activists' consciously-given consent –

their coercive impact differed relative to the identities of particular activists. Decision-making norms that faced some activists as constraints confronted more privileged activists in the form of less binding constraints, or even as enablements. To clarify this relational approach to the OV General Assembly, I begin with what I have labelled “procedural selectivity”:

Procedural Selectivity: Throughout my thesis, I will provide several, first-hand accounts of how predominantly white and cis-male activists policed access to the GAs’ organizational and decision-making resources – for instance, by monopolizing access to the General Assembly Committee, where OV’s facilitators would discuss and determine the GA’s agenda. These monopolies resulted in the concentration of what sociologist Michael Mann (1986) has termed “organizational power,” whereby

...in implementing collective goals, social organization and a division of labor are set up...Those who occupy supervisory and coordinating positions have an immense organizational superiority over others. The interaction and communication networks actually center on their function, as can be seen easily enough in the organization chart possessed by every modern firm. The chart allows superiors to control the entire organization, and it prevents those at the bottom from sharing in this control. It enables those at the top to set in motion machinery for implementing collective goals. Though anyone can refuse to obey, opportunities are probably lacking for establishing alternative machinery for implementing their goals...The few at the top can keep the masses at the bottom compliant, provided their control is *institutionalized* in the laws and the norms of the social group in which both operate (p. 7).

In other words, organizational power enables a particular group to dominate an institution not through violence, but through the privileged access to information, communication networks, and other resources that are used to make organizational decisions.

Using Mann’s description as a template, I posit that we can speak of a “procedural selectivity” at Occupy Vancouver, according to which the GA’s organizational resources proved more or less accessible to agents depending on their capacity to negotiate procedural hurdles to GA participation. To exemplify how activists enacted procedural selectivity at Occupy Vancouver, I turn to the experiences of Sari – a white, cis-female OV activist and a participant in the Occupy Vancouver Women’s

Caucus. As Sari has described OV's procedural selectivities far better than I ever could, I will quote her words at length:

So for instance, in the general assembly structure, the meeting was broken down into certain amounts of time for announcements, certain amounts of time for proposals...and so if you had, say, a proposal you wanted to bring before the meeting, you had to get in the line-up, and get up, and make your proposal to do that. And that meant, for instance, that you had to be jockeying for a place in a line-up, often with a bunch of people who had a lot more privilege than you, and who were really vocal about it. [It was] kind of scary watching the Occupation Documentary [a documentary released on the Occupy Movement] and looking at the footage of the general assemblies there, because you can almost physically see this wall of mostly white, mostly young, mostly male people, kind of around the stage – you know, where the facilitators were at the GA – kind of gatekeeping, because they think their proposal is the most important one, so they're going to wait at the stage all night so that they're the first ones up there. So if you had, you know, women who'd been [discussing something] like "we want to talk about the effects of capitalism on women and do a march or something to target that tomorrow," this is what they're having to cut through to get that onto the stage. It's this incredibly gendered environment. And then, certainly [OV had] structures that drew very heavily on western norms, like: Here's my proposal, here's my argument for it, now we can discuss it in this very linear way that again relies on calling [activists] out, that relies on you having confidence enough to just scream your voice into this mix of other people, to assert your voice over other people. And so that meant that some groups were able to do things with the support of the community behind them, and some groups had less access to doing that.

Nor were these procedural hurdles merely "passive," quietly filtering out marginalized voices who were less able to negotiate the norms of the GA process. Indeed, when marginalized activists resolved to participate on par with white and cis-male GA participants – for instance, by serving as facilitators - they were often rebuked with highly explicit forms of gender policing. I turn again to the words of Sari:

There wasn't a single time I facilitated a general assembly where I wasn't eventually yelled off stage by a bunch of white guys who had notions of what they wanted the meeting to accomplish. I wasn't abiding by their priorities because I was trying to be really responsive to the meeting, so I eventually quit [facilitating]. It was quite interesting, because there were a lot of male people who were asking me to facilitate because they didn't want it to be a bunch of white guys facilitating the meeting, but they would also not intervene when these other things were going on...

Unfortunately, Sari was not the only female-identified Occupy Vancouver activist who felt systematically marginalized and excluded from the General Assembly. By creating an

atmosphere in which women and transgender activists were often unable to facilitate or participate in the General Assembly without feeling harassed or otherwise excluded, many of the more privileged activists attending the General Assembly were able to cultivate a deliberative environment that reflected the interests and perspectives of white cis-men. Over time, these acts of gender policing came to structure the OV General Assembly such that it exhibited a distinct procedural selectivity, according to which it was more difficult – in the sense of demanding higher sacrifices in energy and emotional well-being – for female and other marginalized activists to participate in the GAs, to submit proposals, and to engage in organizational and agenda-setting activities on par with more privileged activists.

Dispositional Selectivity: The procedural selectivity of the OV General Assembly raises an important question: if the formal norms regulating the GA's decision-making process were intended to be participatory, inclusive, and anti-oppressive, then how were broader, macro-scale structures of oppression able to encroach upon the practices of the General Assembly? To answer this question, it is useful to bring up another, more internalized dimension of social structure - what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has famously labelled the "habitus," which refers to

...a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53).

Bourdieu's wording is awkward - we are not accustomed to speaking of "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" - but his meaning is easy enough to explain. Agents tend to spend a great deal of time enacting a particular set of norms that are characteristic of a much larger social group. For instance, I have spent most of my life influenced by social structures that regulate the actions and beliefs of many white, formally-educated upper-middle class males throughout North America. My experiences in this milieu of social structures have led me – along with many others - to internalize the behavioral norms, communication patterns, and bodily movements characteristic of these structures. As such, my generally loud voice, my tendency to speak frequently in classes and in general assemblies, my relatively assertive

mannerisms, and my habit of using certain, overly-verbose words characteristic of a formal education, each serve as verbal and audible cues regarding my background as a privileged white man. Furthermore, unless I engage in self-critique, I have a tendency to embody these norms in ways that are pre-reflexive, in the form of internalized and unquestioned “dispositions.” As such, my habitus – the aggregate of the aforementioned dispositions – has thereby enabled me to extend the social structures of my white, middle class background through time and space, “transposing” them into environments (e.g. the OV General Assembly) in which they otherwise might not exist.

To illustrate the GA’s tendency to privilege certain dispositions, I will draw upon my experiences serving on OV’s General Assembly Committee (GAC), which would meet daily behind the Art Gallery to plan the agenda for that evening’s General Assembly. Composed almost exclusively of GA facilitators, the GAC had a great deal of organizational power, and was able to implicitly demarcate what topics were of importance to the GA, and which could be ignored or relegated to less prominent decision-making bodies (such as one of OV’s individual committees). One remarkable characteristic of the GAC was its ethnic, class, and gender homogeneity. The solid majority of GAC members and GA facilitators were white, cis-male, formally educated activists with ready access to permanent housing - a demographic, in other words, that comprised only a minority of OV activists. This was not a coincidence; there were specific and preventable reasons for this uniformity, many of which revolved around the ways in which GAC members policed the dispositions of marginalized activists.

Take, for instance, Occupy Vancouver’s sizable population of houseless⁴ activists. Throughout my time serving on the GAC, there were several occasions when members of OV’s houseless community would try to participate in the Committee’s meetings. These activists would show up at the GAC meeting, sit behind the Art Gallery, and participate in the discussion, all in the manner of existing GAC members. However, the dispositions of many houseless activists often set them apart, both visibly and audibly, from the bulk of the GAC’s facilitators. Often, this was expressed in vocal

⁴ The term “houseless” was a common descriptor throughout the Occupy Movement. The phrase was typically used in place of the term “homeless” so as to avoid the assumption that, because an individual lacked access to permanent housing, they consequently lacked a “home” in the spiritual, psychological, or social sense.

patterns that were louder than those to which most GAC activists were accustomed. On at least two occasions - there may have been many more in my absence - this led existing GAC members to interpret a houseless activists' mannerisms as being hostile, leading a small cohort of GAC members to pull said houseless activist aside from the meeting and attempt conflict resolution when no such resolution was warranted. I had the opportunity to speak with some of these houseless activists following their experiences, and they expressed to me strong feelings of frustration and exclusion; indeed, I do not recall seeing any of these activists in future GAC meetings. In this respect, one could say that the GAC "selected" for certain dispositions - namely, those of white, male, formally educated and housed activists - thereby rendering GAC participation notably more difficult for activists who did not meet these dispositional criteria.

Discursive Selectivity: Symbols, languages, and ideas all played a considerable role at Occupy Vancouver, and conditioned activists' material practices in important ways. As such, the topic of "discourse" is central to understanding the dynamics of the OV General Assembly. My definition of the term draws heavily on the critical realist-inspired discourse theories of Norman Fairclough and Lillie Chouliaraki. In their co-written work *Discourse in Late Modernity* (1999), Fairclough and Chouliaraki define discourse as the

semiotic elements of social practices. Discourse therefore includes language...nonverbal communication...and visual images...The concept of discourse can be understood as a particular perspective on these various forms of semiosis – it sees them as moments of social practices in their articulations with other non-discursive moments (p. 38).

Fairclough and Chouliaraki's definition of discourse includes both linguistic and extra-linguistic communication. As such, the term refers here not only to texts and the spoken word (i.e. linguistic communication), but to the semiotic dimension of any practice, object, or process. This is an important insight, as many of the discourses that affected everyday life at Occupy Vancouver were non-linguistic in nature. For instance, the dispositions exhibited by many of OV's white and male activists had a strong semiotic aspect, and channeled extra-local discourses of masculinity. After all, the tendency for several white and male activists to "gatekeep" the GA by standing atop the Art Gallery stage had no innate material significance, but was causally effective vis-a-vis gender policing precisely because these dispositions communicated something along the lines

of: "this Art Gallery stage is intended for white and male activists! Minority activists belong at the foot of the stage, with the other non-facilitators!" It was largely through this semiotic component that dispositions (and other features of the OV tent city) regulated activists' access to speaking and decision-making opportunities.

In this sense, discourses were rife at the OV General Assembly; in particular, activists articulated discourses that offered conflicting interpretations of what I will heretofore label the "Occupy Discourse." I use this term to reference the milieu of meanings and signs that were woven together into the discourse that came to characterize the Occupy Movement in the eyes of its constituent activists. As such, the Occupy Discourse included not only linguistic signs (e.g. terms such as "the 99%" and "consensus"), but also practices (such as the hand signals that signalled consent or disagreement to a General Assembly proposal), and values (e.g. the ideals of inclusion and pluralism associated with OV's prefigurative political institutions). Adherence to the Occupy Discourse was nearly ubiquitous throughout the movement; it was rare, for instance, for an activist to overtly question the Discourse's corresponding values of consensus, inclusion, or pluralism. But the referents corresponding to these terms – that is, which activists or practices best represented the values of consensus, etc. - were highly contested, and the disagreements that resulted from conflicting interpretations of the Occupy Discourse drove many of the conflicts that beset the OV General Assembly.

Nor was the Occupy Discourse a purely subjective, semiotic phenomenon. Indeed, Dave Elder-Vass (2012) attributes the durable and socially patterned character of discourse to the same type of social structure – i.e. "norm circles" - that regulate other normative institutions (Ch. 8, Sec. 4, Para. 2). If the Occupy Discourse faced OV activists as a relatively fixed structure of signs and semiotic practices, this is because objective norm circles existed that policed deviations from the Discourse, thereby ensuring its relatively prescribed and predictable character. As such, the Occupy Discourse faced activists as a relatively durable and pre-given horizon of action; any activist desiring to affect the OV General Assembly was thereby required to justify their actions with reference to the Occupy Discourse, which demonstrated amenability to many, conflicting interpretations. In this capacity, the GA possessed a "discursive-selectivity," which critical realist Colin Hay (2001) describes as the capacity

for particular ideas, narratives, and paradigms...to provide cognitive templates through which actors interpret the world...[this] suggests the power of those able to provide the cognitive filters, such as policy paradigms, through which actors interpret the strategic environment. In sum, in the same way that a given context is *strategically-selective* – selecting but never determining certain strategies over others – it is also *discursively-selective* – selecting for, but never determining, the discourses through which it might be appropriated (Para. 51).

Using Hay's language, we could say that many of the conflicts evident at the GA revolved around which activists were best able to articulate a "cognitive filter" through which OV activists interpreted and attributed meaning to their environment. The social structures of the GA privileged activists who could more effectively articulate the Occupy Discourse in such a way as to embody this cognitive filter; inversely, the GA penalized activists who were less able to do so.

To exemplify how different agents attempted to appropriate and define the Occupy Discourse through competing cognitive filters, I turn to some of the many gender struggles endemic to the OV General Assembly. For instance, feminist activists would frequently demand that more time be taken during the GAs to problematize how facilitators and participants used gender to enforce hierarchical and exclusionary decision-making practices. In response, the predominantly white, male facilitators would frequently dismiss these requests, often with reference to the signs, terms, and values most commonly associated with the Occupy Discourse. Facilitators would, for instance, assert the need to abide by a pre-existing General Assembly agenda – a need that was frequently justified on the basis that the agenda had already been agreed upon by *consensus*, implying that any attempt to alter the agenda (for instance, so as to include a discussion of gender) would conflict with the consensus-based principles on which the GA was based.

But the Occupy Discourse was not merely a functionalist ideology that served to reproduce relations of domination; the Occupy Discourse was also articulated in interpretations that challenged Occupy Vancouver's structurally-inscribed inequalities. This process of discursive contestation was not unique to Occupy Vancouver, nor was it relegated to conflicts surrounding gender. Take, for example, the words of the late Joel Olson - an Occupy Phoenix activist and a founding member of the Love and Rage

Revolutionary Anarchist Federation. In an article entitled *Whiteness and the 99%* (2012), Olson wrote:

Left colorblindness claims to be inclusive, but it is actually just another way to keep whites' interests at the forefront. It tells people of color to join "our" struggle (who makes up "our," anyway?) but warns them not to bring their "special" concerns into it. It enables white people to decide which issues are for the 99% and which ones are "too narrow." It's another way for whites to expect and insist on favoured treatment, even in a democratic environment...As long as left colorblindness dominates our movement, there will be no 99%. There will instead be a handful of whites claiming to speak for everyone. When people of color have to enter a movement on white people's terms rather than their own, that's not the 99% That's white democracy (Ch. 7, Para. 3-4).

Here, Olson draws upon the Occupy Discourse not to justify, but to unveil and challenge, the power relations inscribed in many of the tent city general assemblies. Echoing the rhetorical strategies used by many feminist and anti-racist Occupy Vancouver activists, Olsen uses terms such as "democracy" and "the 99" - and refers to values such as "inclusivity" and "pluralism" - to critique the way such terms have been used to justify the disproportionate influence exerted by white activists throughout the Occupy Movement.

2.4. What should Prefigurative Activists Look for in a Social Theory?

The present chapter has covered much ontological, theoretical, and ethnographic ground. By way of conclusion, I will review the various explanatory factors that I have demonstrated to be relevant vis-a-vis a theory of prefigurative politics. I posit that any theory of prefiguration that dismisses these factors a priori will tend to down-play or overlook many of the important causal dynamics characteristic of Occupy Vancouver. *First*, my discussion of critical realism suggests the need to distinguish between structure and agency; between A) objective structures that generate emergent properties, and B) the subjective reasons that motivate agents to act, often in the absence of perfect knowledge regarding objective reality. *Second*, a theory of prefiguration should be capable of analyzing how specific, concrete, socially-situated agents fulfill the roles that constitute complex social structures like Occupy Vancouver. Indeed, when understood relationally, social structures lack causal relevance or ontological existence apart from the actions of specific agents. As such, there are good

prima fascia reasons for activists to be skeptical of social theories that claim to reduce human agency to underlying, macro-scale social structures, thereby reifying structure and abstracting it from agents' concrete practices. *Third*, I have identified discourse, dispositions, and the capacity to access organizational power, as comprising three ways in which prefigurative political bodies privilege certain identities, strategies, or agents over others, thereby introducing an element of coercion into prefigurative political bodies. In the case of Occupy Vancouver, these coercive mechanisms resulted from the GA's imbrication in intersecting, macro-scale structures of domination such as patriarchy and white privilege. As such, a theory of prefiguration requires concepts that can identify linkages between the consensual and formal norms endogenous to prefigurative social structures (on the one hand), and the imported, coercive norms that prevent movements like Occupy Vancouver from realizing their emancipatory aspirations (on the other). I argue that dialectical theory offers precisely such a holistic analytical framework, and it is to a discussion of dialectics that I now turn.

Chapter 3.

Intermezzo: The Dialectic of Occupy Vancouver

Many of the arguments articulated in the second half of my thesis will employ a materialist approach to dialectical social analysis, which derives primarily from the rich tradition of dialectical Marxist thought. Given that most Marxist theory has focused on class- and state-driven forms of social change – rather than the pluralism and anti-statism exemplified by Occupy Vancouver – my use of Marxist dialectics deserves to be problematized. To that end, I offer the following words from radical feminist Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970):

In creating such an analysis [of the dynamics of sex] we can learn a lot from Marx and Engels: Not their literal opinions about women – about the conditions of women as an oppressed class they know next to nothing, recognizing it only where it overlaps with economics – but rather their analytical *method*...Marx and Engels outdid their socialist forerunners in that they developed a method of analysis which was both *dialectical* and *materialist*. The first in centuries to view history dialectically, they saw the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating. Because they were able to perceive history as a movie rather than as a snapshot, they attempted to avoid falling into the stagnant “metaphysics” view that had trapped so many other great minds (p. 2-3).

If Marx and Engels overlooked women’s oppression, then they also undertheorized prefigurative politics⁵. Nevertheless, I posit that these authors’ use of the dialectical *method* retains considerable analytical relevance vis-a-vis Occupy Vancouver, provided it is used in a manner that transcends Marxism’s frequent basis in class- and state-essentialism. But what, exactly, *is* the dialectical method, and how can it clarify the ways in which macro-scale structures of oppression constantly encroached upon the OV General Assembly?

⁵ Importantly, Marx’s writing does not entirely neglect prefigurative or anti-statist social movements. See, for instance, Marx’s description of the Paris Commune’s political organization as described in *The Civil War in France* (1978, p. 627-642).

To answer this question, I draw upon a specifically materialist interpretation of dialectical theory, according to which “dialectics” is treated not primarily as a subjective conceptual framework, but rather as possessing an objective reality. From this perspective, the material world is itself structured dialectically – that is, in the form of an interrelated and constantly-evolving totality. The Czech Marxist humanist Karel Kosik describes this dialectical materialist approach in his *Dialectics of the Concrete* (1976):

The methodological principle for dialectically investigating objective reality is the standpoint of concrete totality. This implies that every phenomenon can be conceived as a moment in a whole. A social phenomenon is an historical fact to the extent to which it is studied as a moment of a certain whole... This interrelatedness and mediatedness of the parts and the whole also signifies that isolated facts are abstractions, artificially uprooted moments of a whole which become concrete and true only when set in the respective whole (p. 22).

Here, the concept of “totality” refers simply to the interrelated character of reality. As individual entities within this reality are constantly determined and affected by broader processes and social forces, it behooves social theorists to situate their subject matter (e.g. Occupy Vancouver) within a broader context (e.g. the institutions of patriarchy and white supremacy in which OV was enmeshed). A social theory that fails to treat its subject holistically - as a moment within a broader totality - engages in methodological abstraction, thereby bracketing social forces that might play an important role in constituting, subverting, or otherwise affecting the operation of the entity under analysis.

However, if everything in reality is interconnected – if, in other words, reality exists such that every particular event is constantly determined by an internally-related totality – then reality must embody a constant flux. As such, dialectics analyzes the world in its capacity as “...processes, flows, fluxes, and relations [rather than as] elements, things, structures, and organized systems” (Harvey, 1996, 49). From this perspective, a dialectical analysis would imply viewing Occupy Vancouver as a fluid and constantly-changing aggregate of distinct processes, such as those entailed by life in the tent city or by the distinct rhythms characteristic of General Assembly discussions. These processes did not operate harmoniously, however; they were riven by “dialectical contradictions,” which Bertell Ollman (2003) defines as “the incompatible development of different elements within the same relation, which is to say between elements that are also dependent on one another” (p. 17). To phrase Ollman’s definition a bit more

concretely: dialectical contradictions are characterized by a complex dynamic of integration and disintegration; the very process that unites the terms of a dialectical contradiction also wrenches them apart. This dynamic generates repeated conflict, but also instigates change in whatever social structures are responsible for the dialectical contradiction in question – a phenomenon that played an important role in driving the internal transformation of Occupy Vancouver.

Take, for instance, the motivations that drove activists' participation in the General Assembly. On the one hand, the GA offered participants an opportunity to engage in direct political participation, to situate themselves within a meaningful community and ideology, and to pursue goals of social justice, all in a manner foreclosed – or at least rendered immeasurably more difficult - by dominant political institutions. Joseph Leivdal, a fellow OV activist, brilliantly illustrates some of the emotions that drove activists to participate in the OV General Assembly; in an essay recounting his experiences at Occupy Vancouver, he writes:

I could refer to it [Occupy Vancouver] as the period that I came into the world. Occupy Vancouver became my sandbox, and I was amazed at how my words and actions could shape my immediate surroundings. We were creating a new culture, and for the very first time in my life I felt like I had the ability to reach out into my world and affect it. I was no longer living inside of myself, I was living in the world, and it felt like I was doing this for the very first time (Leivdal, 2012).

These sentiments were shared by many Occupy activists; metaphors of birth ("coming into the world"), of architecture ("shaping my surroundings"), and of creation ("creating a new culture") were rampant within the Movement, and spoke to the common expectation that the tent cities should serve as a space in which participants could feel empowered and meaningful, even in the midst of a society defined by alienation, commodification, and a dearth of substantive political participation.

The strong attraction that activists felt towards Occupy Vancouver represents the "integrative" element of dialectical contradiction. However, as we have seen with reference to the GA's strategic-selectivities, Occupy Vancouver's social structures were not experienced by all activists in an identical, emancipatory fashion. Indeed, OV activists approached the General Assembly through a wide variety of perspectives and degrees of privilege, with some activists experiencing a far easier time attaining the

ideals of participation and recognition that virtually all Occupy activists had adopted as an aspiration. This element of exclusivity represents the “dis-integrative” aspect of Occupy Vancouver which, when paired with the GA's attractions as a prefigurative political structure, resulted in dialectical contradictions that split the GA along lines of gender, ethnicity, and class. On the one hand, the processes of the General Assembly served as a necessary resource for the participatory and dialogical community sought by most OV activists. On the other hand, these same processes prevented many activists from experiencing equitable and inclusive participation in practice. Much of the frustration, anger, and alienation that many marginalized GA participants expressed can best be understood with reference to this contradictory dynamic.

Before I elaborate three of the conceptual binaries central to materialist dialectics, a brief counter-argument is in order. For, many theories of prefiguration have criticized dialectics, citing its perceived tendency towards teleological closure - expressed through the view that contradiction will inevitably be resolved in a future synthesis - and a corresponding hostility towards difference and pluralism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have, perhaps, taken this criticism of dialectics the farthest. In their co-written work *Empire* (2000), Hardt and Negri fault what they label “the dialectic” for the oppressive nature of modern sovereignty:

More precisely still, [theories constituting postmodernist thought] are brought together most coherently in a challenge to the dialectic as the central logic of modern domination, exclusion, and command – for both its relegating the multiplicity of difference to binary oppositions and its subsequent subsumption of these differences under a unitary order. If modern power itself is dialectical, the logic goes, then the postmodernist project must be nondialectical... (p. 140).

The discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau has articulated a similar criticism towards the dialectical theory of German idealist philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel, whose work Laclau tends to portray as representing dialectical theory tout court. In the volume *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), Laclau asserts, in response to theorists Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler, that Hegel's

Absolute Idea as the system of all determination is a closed totality: beyond it, no further advance is possible. The dialectical movement from one category to the next excludes all contingency...It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hegel's panlogicism [his belief that reality is characterized by a logical order - BL] is the highest point of modern rationalism (p. 61).

Finally, we can take a typical criticism of dialectical theory from the pages of Richard J.F. Day's *Gramsci is Dead* (2005):

Affinity-based action *is* ethical action, though it is clearly not moral, that is, not universalizing or totalizing in intent... This distinction is extremely difficult to comprehend from within the liberal and marxist traditions, with their common basis in Hegelian notions of totality and ethical community. Morality, ethics, and universality are seen within these paradigms – including their “postmodern” variants – as inextricably bound to one another, so that it is impossible to conceive of an ethical act that is not based on a moment of universalization, or at least universalizability (p. 90).

Here, Day contrasts a prefigurative political ethic with the forms of “universalizing” morality supposedly shared by liberalism, Marxism, and dialectics, which Day affiliates with the usurpation of state power (p. 80).

It is characteristic of Hardt, Negri, Laclau, and Day that they neglect to provide readers with any substantive textual or historical evidence against which we might confirm their interpretation of dialectics. As such, the highly totalizing claims articulated in the above passages are not readily falsifiable, and we can only guess at the assumptions, proofs, and argumentative processes from which they arose. Nevertheless, there are two common - and easily refutable - assumptions underlying each of the aforementioned passages. Firstly, their authors write of dialectics as if it possessed a merely *subjective* reality, variously describing dialectics as a “logic,” a “paradigm,” a “morality” or a set of “ideas.” This position is articulated most explicitly in Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000), in which the authors claim that “Reality and history...are not dialectical, and no idealist rhetorical gymnastics can make them conform to the dialectic” (2000, p. 131). The corollary of this argument is that dialectics demonstrates no necessary relationship with the objective world, in which case there is nothing to stop theorists from abandoning dialectics for a “postmodern logic” (Hardt and Negri), or for a system of “affinity-based ethics” (Day) that avoids dialectical theory's supposed failings. Secondly, each of these theorists describes dialectics as entailing a closed and reductive teleology, variously referring to dialectics A) as subsuming difference under a unitary order (Hardt and Negri), B) as excluding all contingency (Laclau), and C) as entailing forms of universal morality that are anti-thetical to affinity-based models of “ethical action” (Day). These assertions imply that dialectical theory

necessarily contradicts the principles of prefigurative politics which, by contrast, are predicated on values of pluralism and irreducible difference.

If this portrayal of dialectics were accurate, then I would have no qualms about abandoning it for a more trendy theoretical alternative. However, the mischaracterizations concealed in the above passages are legion. For one, insofar as these criticisms present Hegelian dialectics as idealist and/or reductive, they assume an interpretation of Hegel that is in fact highly contested. Hegel scholars as diverse as the Marxist feminist Raya Dunayevskaya (1989, p. 11-18), the queer theorist Judith Butler (2000, p. 172-173), and the literary theorist Fredric Jameson (2010, p. 1-5) have each contested the charge that Hegel's philosophy is guilty of teleological closure and the subordination of plurality to identity. Furthermore, theorists in the scholarly field known as "systematic dialectics" have questioned the interpretation of Hegel as an idealist; to combat this perspective, systematic dialecticians such as Tony Smith (1990) have used textual evidence to demonstrate Hegel's basis in a materialist ontology (p. 8-13).

Finally – and most importantly, for my present purposes - *even if* we accept an interpretation of Hegel as teleological and idealist, there is no reason to identify these tendencies with dialectical theory tout court. For one, Marx himself formulated his materialist conception of dialectics based on several critiques of Hegel's thought. In the section of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1978) entitled "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole," Marx denounces Hegel's penchant both for idealism and for what later theorists would label "teleological closure" (see, for instance, p. 121-125). Nor was this critique of Hegelian dialectics unique to Marx; as Marxist historian Martin Jay has argued, most of what is known as "Western Marxism" has formulated its theories against precisely the idealist and teleological interpretation of dialectics often attributed to Hegel (and, it should be noted, to the early works of Western Marxist Gyorgy Lukacs) (Jay, 1984, p. 47, 59-60, 413-414). Indeed, for the dialectical theorists whose work I will present in the following chapter, the subjective, logical, and analytical moment of dialectical theory entails nothing more nor less than an attempt to understand how the material, objective world is already dialectical, and thereby defined by interrelated and conflicting processes.

From this perspective, “totality” does not entail an act of subsuming difference under unity, nor does it imply that a collective subject (such as the proletariat) will identify itself with the objective world, thereby ridding the world of contradiction. Indeed,

The dialectics of the concrete totality is not a method that would naively aspire to know all aspects of reality exhaustively and to present a “total” image of reality, with all its infinite aspects and properties. Concrete totality is not a method for capturing and describing *all* aspects, features, properties, relations, and processes of reality. Rather, it is a theory of reality as a concrete totality. This conception of reality...as a whole that is structured...that evolves...and that is in the process of forming...has certain methodological implications that will become a heuristic guide and an epistemological principle for the study, description, comprehension, interpretation and evaluation of certain thematic sections of reality, be it physics or literary criticism, biology or political economy, theoretical problems of mathematics or practical issues of organizing human life and social conditions (p. 19).

According to a Kosik's dialectics, “totality” refers to an objective relation, which provides an important “heuristic” guide to theory - that is, a guide that is experiential, practical, and necessarily imperfect, rather than one that is predicated on absolute certainty. Given this interpretation of dialectics, there is no basis on which to assume A) the inevitable resolution of contradictions, B) the relegation of dialectics to the status of a subjective framework - whether “ethical” or “logical” in nature - that lacks an ontological basis in material reality, or C) the *methodological* reduction of difference to unity (even if the objective referent of dialectical analysis, such as capitalism or patriarchy, might very well reduce difference to unity in its structural dynamics).

If Hardt, Negri, Laclau, and Day also oppose this form of distinctly *materialist* dialectics, they provide no evidence for their position. Indeed, such an argument would need to defend the assertion that the world is *not* composed of interrelated, conflicting processes, the dynamics of which can only be fully understood with reference to a totality in which these processes are situated. Such a criticism would suggest that the dynamics of the OV General Assembly can be understood without reference to its institutional environment of (for instance) patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism – a theoretical position I hope to have disproved with reference to my discussion of OV’s “strategic-selectivity” in the former chapter, and which I will continue to challenge in the chapters ahead. Having thereby distanced the materialist approach to dialectics from the criticisms of Hardt, Negri, Laclau, and Day, I turn to a discussion of three binaries that

are fundamental to dialectical analysis, and that will form the basis for the arguments presented in the second half of my thesis.

Chapter 4.

Against False Dichotomies: An Emergentist Approach to Dialectics

In the present chapter, my goal is to explore three binaries characteristic of dialectical theory; namely, those comprising A) necessity and contingency, B) abstract universality and concrete universality, and C) positivity and negativity. Addressing each of these binaries in turn, my goal will be three-fold. *First*, I will demonstrate how each conceptual pair can best be theorized dialectically - that is, as mutually-supportive and co-constitutive terms, which nevertheless remain analytically distinct and irreducible. To demonstrate a more precise relationship between the terms of each couplet, I will draw on the emergentist ontology described in Chapter Two, whereby causal properties can derive from underlying structures without being reducible to them. I seek an emergentist basis for these dialectical binaries for a very specific, politically-motivated reason; namely, having disproved these concepts' dichotomous nature, I will be in a better position to refute the various forms of reductivism that characterize many existing theories of prefiguration, preventing these theories from adequately addressing the concrete problems faced by prefigurative activists. *Secondly*, I will illustrate how the central categories of materialist dialectics can be applied in a manner that avoids class essentialism. Indeed, I will argue that materialist dialectics can be used to describe the intersecting structural dynamics underlying patriarchy, white supremacy, and the Occupy Vancouver General Assembly, all in a manner irreducible to economic categories. *Thirdly*, I will clarify how Gramscian concepts can enable activists to apply each dialectical binary in a manner that informs anti-oppressive initiatives within movements like Occupy Vancouver. *Finally*, and by way of conclusion, I will illustrate how each of the binaries in question is fundamentally relational, and is therefore experienced differently based on an agent's background and identity. I will now consider these binaries sequentially, with the goal of proving their dialectical interconnection.

4.1. Necessity and Contingency

Necessity and contingency are important concepts in social theory, where they are often used to consider questions of teleology - that is, the capacity for history to develop towards a pre-ordained goal (Collier, 1994, p. 111). According to my usage, "necessity" refers to any force that conditions an agent's activity in a manner over which they have no immediate control; "contingency," by contrast, refers to any activity that is unconditioned by such objective constraints. At first glance, these terms appear irreconcilable, lacking any commonality or capacity to co-exist. *Either* an objective reality confronts me in the form of necessity, in which case my behavior is constrained; *or* my actions are unconstrained by such forces, and are therefore conducted freely. Phrased as such, the dichotomy seems unresolvable; indeed, in Chapter Five, I will critique two social theories that view necessity and contingency through precisely such a dichotomous lens.

However, within materialist dialectics, this binary is frequently recognized as a false one, and is instead theorized such that necessity and contingency are mutually necessary. Take, for instance, the words of Marxist humanist and dialectical geographer Henri Lefebvre, who, in an early work entitled *Dialectical Materialism* (1968), writes:

Every determinism is a consolidated series. It has an objective significance and an objective reality, as well as something relative and subjective about it... Thus there is something objective about mechanism and about determinism, but we must be careful not to see them as purely objective and turn them into a fatality. The determinism takes its place in the sum-total of the determinations and objectives of activity. The sum-total of determinisms constitutes a whole controlled by human activity. This sum-total, organized by the praxis and in which the unity of the real is recovered, no partial determinism being able ever wholly to shatter it, is the truly concrete (1968, 122-123).

Here, Lefebvre is describing the interrelated character of both determinism and contingent agency (or "human activity"), each of which creates the conditions of possibility for the other. On the one hand, we can posit determining elements within the objective world; these constrain us and delimit our possible horizons of action. On the other hand, free agency is only possible because this objective world exists as a substance with which agents can interact. Indeed, it is precisely through such interaction with the material world that we, as agents, are able to develop our praxis - that is, our

free, creative, and critical life activity. To put this more concretely: a wall may constrain us, thereby serving as a determinant of our activity; however, it is only by being constrained by a wall that we learn how to climb, thereby developing our powers and capacities as human beings. Here, the dichotomy between necessity (the constraining influence of the wall) and contingency (the capacity for free activity) has been abolished, as the former provides the basis for the latter, in addition to constraining it.

Lefebvre's words resemble the more recent writings of Bob Jessop (2008), who has also questioned the antinomy between necessity and contingency. Jessop speaks of determining causes as being invariably located within manifold "causal chains" that are themselves predicated on both necessity *and* contingency. Jessop thereby refers to causality as "contingent necessity," which he describes thus:

"contingent necessity" indicates both the *de facto* causal determination (necessity) of events and phenomena and their *ex ante* indeterminability (contingency). In other words, events and phenomena are the products of non-necessary interaction among different causal chains to produce a definite outcome that first became necessary through the contingent articulation of various causal chains (p. 229).

In other words, the distinction between contingency and necessity is a false dichotomy; wherever there is necessity, there is also contingency, as the former exists due to the interaction of distinct causal chains that lack any necessary relationship.

Take, for example, the OV tent city. Several causal chains interacted such that the tent city could become a social-structural reality capable of conditioning, foreclosing, and enabling the actions of OV activists. These causal chains were manifold, and included A) the development of the wireless technology responsible for the tent city's communication networks, B) the evolution of the Occupy Movement as a whole, C) the growth of the varied social networks that pre-existed Occupy Vancouver and facilitated its appearance, and D) the progressively worsening crisis tendencies of neoliberal capitalism, without which there might not have been an Occupy Movement at all. That each of these causal chains interacted to provide the conditions of existence for Occupy Vancouver was a largely contingent phenomenon, occurring either due to chance or to the unpredictable practices of individual agents. Nothing about the initiation of Occupy Wall Street (on the one hand) or the development of Vancouver's activist and student networks (on the other) were intertwined in any necessary sense.

However, after each of these causal chains interacted to create the Occupy Vancouver tent city, they attained a more necessary character in the form of OV's constituent social structures, which conditioned the actions of OV activists in a manner that was determining. As such, the OV tent city was both the result of contingent and unrelated causal chains, while simultaneously aggregating these chains into a social structure that faced activists as a relatively durable and necessary institutional reality. Far from being dichotomous, necessity and contingency are therefore mutually necessary. Contingent causal chains only gain the capacity to influence human behavior by congealing into social structures that articulate determining powers; inversely, necessary social structures only exist as an aggregation of contingent causal chains. Contingency, from this perspective, is merely necessity analyzed from a different perspective.

The reciprocal constitution of necessity and contingency entails a number of interesting and practically-relevant corollaries. In particular, I posit that contingency stands as an emergent property of necessity; as such, freedom is fundamentally determined by the composition of both biological and social structures. Here, my argument relies upon the insights contained in sociologist Anthony Giddens's earlier work on Marxist sociology, in which Giddens argues that social structures not only constrain, but also enable, human agency. In his *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981), Giddens asserts that "constraint and enablement are two sides of one coin, such that any theory which links constraint to the structural properties of social systems must treat structure as both constraining and enabling" (p. 56). Phrased in the terminology under discussion, Giddens does not contrast contingency with determination; rather, he argues that determining social structures can enable human agency, thereby allowing agents to do things they might not otherwise be able to do.

Having illustrated Giddens's formulation, it becomes easier to identify how contingency and freedom emerge from determining social structures. For, the very capacity for human beings to demonstrate agentic powers – that is, the ability to act upon reasons (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 93) – is predicated on the ways in which biological, chemical, and social structures are arranged. If the neurons of my brain were structured in a different fashion, they would not generate the emergent property of "Ben's consciousness" - a consciousness that possesses the ability to experience freedom in a

manner that, say, a rock or a leaf does not.⁶ Similarly, if the material components of my computer were arranged differently, I would not possess the freedom to type my thesis. And if the social structures underlying Simon Fraser University were not rewarding me for my thesis-writing efforts - either in the form of money or of a Master's degree - then I would not possess my current freedom to study and write about "freedom." My capacity to do each of these things relies upon determining, necessary structures, and it is only with reference to these structures that we can speak of "contingency."

If contingency emerges from the necessary character of structural determination, it nevertheless represents a form of causality that is irreducible to structures of any kind. In Elder-Vass's (2010) words, "Although it is often suggested that human agency entails the freedom of human action from the external constraints of social structure...agency is entirely consistent with social impacts on our behavior. Human action may be affected by social causes without being *fully determined* by them" (p. 87). Indeed, human agency often reacts back upon social structure in unpredictable ways, thereby altering a society's structural composition, as during moments of revolutionary upheaval. As such, any account of activism or social change that focuses exclusively on structural determination will miss the many ways in which human agents act contingently, on reasons that are irreducible to structure.

Gramsci's concepts can help activists apply the categories of necessity and contingency, thereby demonstrating their interrelation not only in theory, but also in practice. In particular, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971) frequently distinguish between two, dialectically-interrelated levels of social change: a "conjunctural" level characterized by contingent and unpredictable conflict, and an "organic" level distinguished by more durable and long-term structural dynamics which, in turn, help to condition conflicts at the conjunctural level (p. 177-178). In Gramsci's words,

...in studying a structure, it is necessary to distinguish organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be termed "conjunctural" (and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental). Conjunctural phenomena too depend on organic movements to be sure, but they do not have any very far-reaching historical significance; they give rise to political criticism of

⁶ On the emergence of cognition from biological structures, see Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 89-93.

a minor, day-to-day character...Organic phenomena on the other hand give rise to socio-historical criticism, whose subject is wider social groupings... A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity) , and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them...and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts...form the terrain of the “conjunctural,” and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize (1971, p. 177-178).

Gramsci’s categories are extremely useful when diagnosing the many conflicts evident at the OV General Assembly - conflicts that demonstrated both an organic/determined and a conjunctural/contingent aspect. On the one hand, we can identify the General Assembly as a “conjunctural” structure, as it entailed localized and spontaneous conflicts – for instance, over gender inclusion vis-a-vis the GA’s decision-making structures. OV activists faced these conjunctural structures as contingent realities, i.e. as institutions over which activists held a certain, relational degree of control. On the other hand, the conjunctural structures and conflicts surrounding the General Assembly can be distinguished from the durable and macro-scale institutions of (for instance) patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and the state. Each of these institutions constituted organic structures that pre-existed the General Assembly and that faced activists objectively, in a manner over which activists had no immediate influence.

The many conflicts that punctuated the OV General Assembly can best be understood as the confluence of these distinct levels of conflict. On the one hand, the organic structures of patriarchy, etc., created the institutional context from which OV activists derived their coercive practices. The contradictions entailed by these organic structures – and by their underlying hierarchies demarcating female from male activists, cis-gender from trans-gender activists, or white activists from those of marginalized ethnicities – determined the micro-level conflicts of the General Assembly in a powerful and often unquestioned manner. Indeed, there would have been immeasurably fewer conflicts within the GA if activists had not channelled this broader field of social relations, which determined the GA in ways that were often highly problematic.

However, the GA’s affiliated conflicts cannot simply be explained away with reference to these organic structures; the micro-level conflicts of the General Assembly articulated their own, emergent properties that revolved around many of the local

exigencies, norms, and power struggles unique to Occupy Vancouver. Here, we could point to the struggles that frequently occurred regarding access to the Art Gallery stage, or to the GA's electric microphone. These objects served as local nodes of contestation, which encouraged struggles that were determined by - though irreducible to - underlying macro-level structures.

4.2. Abstract Universality and Concrete Universality

Thus far, my discussion has emphasized ontology – that is, the study of being. However, the terms “abstract universal” and “concrete universal” are categories of *epistemology*, which “seeks to uncover the procedures and conditions that make knowledge possible” (Harvey, 1973, p. 196). Epistemology, in other words, seeks to identify how agents interpret, categorize, and think about the objective, material world. To describe the process of understanding entailed by a distinctly *dialectical* epistemology, I reference the writings of Joseph Dietzgen – a contemporary of Marx, one of the earliest exponents of materialist dialectics, and a labour activist who frequented both anarchist and Marxist circles. In his classic *The Nature of Human Brainwork* (1906), Dietzgen asserts that “we become aware of the outer world in a twofold way, viz., in a concrete, tangible, manifold form, and in an abstract form, which is mental and unitary. To our senses the world appears as a variety of forms. Our brains combine them as a unit” (Ch. 2, Para. 11). Dialectical epistemologists refer to this aggregated “unit” as a “universal” – a term that refers to a concept that is common to several different phenomena. The universal concept of the colour “red,” for instance, can represent the colouration of blood, roses, and red paint, each of these being fundamentally different concepts that share the universal trait of being red. More pertinently, the “Occupy Movement” can be characterized as a universal concept, as it refers to some common element underlying the various Occupy tent cities. Whatever their tremendous differences, each of the local Occupy encampments shared a commitment to the manifold processes, values, and social structures that we collectively associate with the Occupy Movement; as such, the various tent cities were represented under the term “Occupy” in its capacity as a universal concept.

Dialectical theorists use the term "abstraction" to refer to the process by which the mind interprets reality in the form of universals amenable to cognition. The dialectical theorist Bertell Ollman (2003) describes this process with reference to Marx's epistemology:

In his most explicit statement on the subject, Marx claims that his method starts from the "real concrete" (the world as it presents itself to us) and proceeds through "abstraction" (the intellectual activity of breaking this whole down into the mental units with which we think about it) to the "thought concrete" (the reconstituted and now understood whole present in the mind)...The real concrete is simply the world in which we live, in all its complexity. The thought concrete is Marx's reconstruction of that world in the theories of what has come to be called "Marxism." The royal road to understanding is said to pass from the one to the other through the process of abstraction (2003, p. 60).

The process of "abstraction," then, forms the basis for any act of cognition. As our minds cannot process the full complexity characteristic of objective and material reality, we are compelled to categorize our sense experiences, aggregating them into universal concepts that simplify reality in such a way as to render it intelligible. If these universals come to represent objectivity - i.e. the "real concrete" - through theories, discourses, or concepts that are nuanced and reflective of reality, then we can piece together a mental representation of objectivity in the form of what Marx and Ollman call the "thought concrete." Alternatively, we could say that such concepts are based on "concrete universals" that clarify the complexity of reality with a greater degree of accuracy than "abstract universals," which, in turn, embody more partial, simplistic, or inadequate concepts.

The goal of much dialectical epistemology is to help clarify how our more abstract conceptions of reality – predicated upon simplified universals and limited points of view – can be rendered more concrete and reflective of the complexity embodied by the material, objective world. This is a project that is fundamentally political, as abstract conceptions of the world – conceptions that represent, say, the distinct viewpoints of the bourgeoisie, or of white, cis-male, formally educated Occupy Vancouver activists – tend to simplify our interpretation of reality in ways that reflect interests that may not be our own. Inversely, a more concrete perspective – one that is based on the nuance entailed by our everyday, lived experiences – tends to clarify interests that more abstract ideologies may mystify.

To highlight the political implications of the concrete/abstract dyad, I will now introduce a further concept - one implicit in Marx, but first introduced by the Marxist Gyorgy Lukacs in his anthology of essays entitled *History and Class Consciousness* (1972, p. 150). Fredric Jameson - a philosopher, literary theorist, and historian of dialectical currents within Marxist thought - explains the concept of a standpoint in his article *History and Class Consciousness: An Unfinished Project*:

The presupposition is that, owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives in the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups (p. 215-216).

Marxist feminist Nancy Hartsock (1998), one of the first theorists to apply Marxist standpoint theory to gender relations, has articulated the concept in a fashion similar to Jameson, while emphasizing its sub-conscious character:

A standpoint is not simply an interested position (interpreted as bias) but is interested in the sense of being engaged. It is true that a desire to conceal real social relations can contribute to an obscurantist account, and it is also true that the ruling gender and class have material interests in deception. A standpoint, however, carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible (p. 107).

Standpoints are notable in that they allow agents to engage in oppressive practices without necessarily being aware of their oppressive character. As such, a privileged standpoint – one that obfuscates relations of domination - does not always suggest overt self-interest, but can instead result from agents' inability to recognize forms of oppression that they have not, themselves, experienced first-hand. Given the perspective of a marginalized individual – say, a female-identified activist in the OV tent city - privileged standpoints are therefore characterized by abstract universals (those that distort reality by obfuscating the interests entailed by said activist's everyday practices as a woman). Inversely, a feminist standpoint would face this individual as a concrete perspective (and therefore reflective of the activist's gender-specific life experiences).

Nor, finally, is standpoint theory an essentialist attempt to posit some unchanging "essence" behind a particular group's perspective. As Hartsock has clarified in her more recent writings, the feminist standpoint is not a positive, actually-existing entity, but exists only in the form of a potentiality: "Thus, I make no claim about the actual consciousness of existing women, but rather I am arguing about the theoretical conditions of possibility for creating alternatives" (p. 236). Describing a similar interpretation of feminist standpoint theory, material feminist Dorothy Smith (1987) has also argued against an essentialist interpretation:

The standpoint of women therefore as I am deploying it here cannot be equated with perspective or worldview. It does not universalize a particular experience. It is rather a method that, at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds (Ch. 3, Sec. 1, Par. 5).

As such, a group's standpoint is not pre-given, but must be struggled for and constructed through a largely contingent process. The outcome of this process is a world view that clarifies the structural interests of the group in question. However, social groups are not homogenous. Given that our social practices are patterned by a variety of social structures - including those of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy - any group standpoint will invariably be "intersectional," and therefore predicated on several, overlapping standpoints characteristic of our gender-, race-, and class-based practices (Collins, 2000, p. 23-25).

To demonstrate the relevance of dialectical and standpoint epistemology for movements like Occupy Vancouver, I turn to the experiences of two white, cis-male, formally educated OV activists. Below, I include their answers to my questions regarding A) whether or not certain OV activists were marginalized from the General Assembly process, B) what the identity characteristics of these marginalized activists were, and C) what measures the GA took, if any, to address these forms of marginalization. First, I present the response of Gary, a General Assembly facilitator:

Outside of First Nations, as a visible minority race or whatever, I wouldn't say there [were] any other distinctions that seemed to make a difference. You really didn't get too many people with strong accents...you generally need to be loud and clear to have confidence and feel good about yourself, so you wouldn't really have people with strong accents [facilitating GAs]... There were more younger people

than older people...But it's weird because there are some people who are obviously part of some type of visible minority – I mean, they have slightly darker skin and black hair and brown eyes, I mean they're obviously not Caucasian...but it's clear that English is their first language, it's clear that they've grown up here, and they don't seem like they're at a disadvantage, and eventually you stop seeing them as a minority if you ever saw them that way in the first place, but then you were sort of forced to see them as a minority because people were playing these games about "OK, well, make sure that not everybody's white on the stage" and stuff like that...and so, the identity politics is so not clearly defined...you never really know [if activists are minorities] anyways, so being forced to try to see it that way was just so strange. I'm glad people didn't push too much of an affirmative action policy [for mandatory diversity on facilitation teams]...of course there were more white guys who were willing to be facilitators because they have loud voices, they're used to being heard, there's not that barrier to access...but there [were] plenty of white women...There's always these echoes of gender inequality and stuff like that, but there were plenty of white women who had no problem being up on stage, there was never a shortage of them being there...[but] the age thing was probably the most noticeable [characteristic differentiating OV facilitators from non-facilitators].

Or take the response of Luke, another white, cis-male GA participant:

Ok, we gotta make sure that everybody's allowed to talk...and whether or not that's a legitimate concern, at least we're constantly reminded all the time that it's possible for voices to be marginalized, and, I mean, it seems like because it's constantly pointed out, it's sort of a natural order. People are gonna be louder than other people. Some people are gonna be very coherent and very articulate and everyone is gonna start listening to them more and speaking less. So it seems like the marginalization of voices is natural, and so as long as people are pointing [marginalizing practices] out as much as possible, it holds back that tendency. But, yeah, it's really hard to tell if marginalized voices aren't being heard...

I find these excerpts extremely informative in highlighting what we might label the "white, cis-male, formally educated standpoint" prevalent amongst activists at Occupy Vancouver. On the one hand, neither of these excerpts promotes oppressive decision-making practices in any explicit way. Indeed, my familiarity with both activists suggests that they would be among the first to criticize anything they identified as expressing patriarchy or white supremacy. Nevertheless, both of their answers betray a highly abstract standpoint, in the sense of expressing a very particular and gendered point of view that is incapable of recognizing - on a deep, sub-conscious, and phenomenological-specific level - the forms of exclusion faced by marginalized activists.

The conceptual limitations of this standpoint, and its corresponding inability to recognize the problems faced by more marginalized activists, are demonstrated in the above passages in several ways. Both Luke and Greg waver in their answers to my question, as if they're not entirely sure how to respond; many female-identified interviewees, by contrast, tended to answer such questions far more readily and assuredly. Both activists provide subtle justifications for marginalizing practices, with Luke defining such practices as "natural," and with Greg challenging the need for affirmative action policies by recounting the inclusivity of the GA vis-a-vis female activists. Indeed, as was characteristic of most of my interviews, the way in which the topic of "gender" was broached was itself highly gendered. Most of my female-identified interviewees mentioned gender relatively early in the interview; by contrast, many (though not all) of the male interviewees neglected the subject entirely until prompted. These conversational tendencies were not arbitrary, but resulted from a distinct standpoint – one that skewed the epistemological frames of male activists such that they were unable to “see” the forms of exclusion experienced by women and transgender activists in the tent city. As such, the standpoint in question reflected and promoted the intersecting structural interests entailed by cis-male GA participants - a process that was causally effective precisely because it was pursued subconsciously, at the level of activists' unquestioned common sense.

Having outlined standpoint epistemology, I am in a better position to demonstrate the emergent relationship between concrete and abstract universality, whereby abstract universals (the categories through which we conceptualize reality) constitute the emergent property of the real concrete (the structures inscribed in the objective world). For, objectivity provides the basis for any sense experience; our abstract concepts are only possible because of the way in which the objective world is structured so as to generate particular sense datum, which our cognition categorizes so as to render experience comprehensible. Furthermore, as the character of objective reality remains consistent regardless of the agents who perceive it, this objective stratum serves as the common basis upon which distinct agents can render their subjective experiences, meanings, and desires communicable to other agents. To put this more concretely: the material structures of the OV tent city, and the social structures regulating the General Assembly, were ultimately objective realities that formed the shared, material

environment in which OV activists constructed their common experiences and identities. Through these objective structures, activists engaged in day-to-day practices that were responsible for the signs, meanings, and identities affiliated with the Occupy Discourse. These signs – including terms like “the GA” and “tent city” - were only rendered understandable to the majority of OV activists because they referenced material objects that formed the basis for activists’ common experiences. As such, the abstract concepts through which activists conceptualized Occupy Vancouver constituted the *emergent property* of the concrete, material structures that pervaded tent city life. If these structures had been constituted differently - if there had been no Art Gallery stage or tent city, or if the rules underlying GA deliberations had been fundamentally different – OV activists would have experienced a very different reality of “Occupy Vancouver,” and their identities and discourses would have reflected this alteration in the objective structures of OV.

However, although they derive from concrete sense experience, our abstract concepts are not reducible to the material world. Indeed, our perspectives and discursive frames articulate their own, irreducible causal effects, which react back upon objectivity by informing human practice. Although the objective structures of Occupy Vancouver faced activists in the form of common spaces (the Art Gallery stage) and norms (the rules regulating the GA), activists often experienced these objective realities in dramatically different ways, according to their standpoints as determined by macro-scale structures such as patriarchy and white supremacy. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, any attempt to theorize an objective General Assembly structure distinct from the experiences of concrete agents can only remain an abstraction; activists never faced these structures in an identical fashion, but as socially-situated individuals whose standpoints were fundamentally shaped by particular identities, life histories, and other subjective factors irreducible to objectivity and the concrete real. Furthermore, these abstract and subjective standpoints can react back upon objectivity, as when feminist activists challenged the structuration of the General Assembly due to its foundation in gender policing and patriarchal decision-making norms. Therefore, while abstract universals emerge from the concrete real, they are hardly reducible to it, but exert a significant degree of independence based on the characteristics and perspectives of particular, socially-situated individuals.

Here, again, the ideas of Gramsci demonstrate considerable critical and analytical utility, particularly given his epistemological concepts of "common sense" and "good sense." In my introduction, I defined common sense as any discourse that structures an agent's everyday practice in a manner that is unquestioned and accepted pre-reflexively (1971, p. 331). As such, common sense tends to be abstract - its constituent discourse *might* reflect the concrete experiences and interests of a given agent, but nothing suggests that this should be the norm; rather, common sense is more likely to reflect the heterogonous practices, assumptions, and beliefs that characterize a given society or social group. The abstract universals constituting common sense thereby lack any necessary relation to a given agent's concrete practices, and might even obfuscate oppressive social relations. "Good sense," by contrast, refers to common sense discourses that have been refined through agents' critical reflection, resulting in concrete discourses that correspond with an agents' practical life activity and its affiliated interests (p. 328).

Common sense and good sense are therefore fundamentally relational. Whereas a sign can possess an abstract and oppressive meaning when inserted into a discourse of common sense – thereby obfuscating the oppressive realities underlying social relations – this same sign can demonstrate an emancipatory importance when articulated in a discourse of good sense. This relationality was particularly evident in debates over interpretations of the Occupy Discourse, whereby signs like "consensus," "the 99%," and "non-violence" played a contradictory role. These terms were used in ways that vacillated, often quite rapidly, between cultivating unquestioned and abstract common sense, and promoting critical and concrete good sense. Take, for example, the words of Occupy NOLA (aka Occupy New Orleans) activist Sophie Whittemore (2012), who describes how terms such as "non-violence" were used to justify patriarchal relations in the Occupy NOLA General Assembly:

The right answer [that men posed to the problems they deemed relevant to Occupy NOLA] seemed to be verbal attacks on banks, congress, dysfunctional schools - caricatures that represent oppressive power to the mainstream. But when a women points to a strange power dynamic that plays out in her conversation with a man in camp and asks him to check himself [for male privilege], the defensiveness sets in. And sometimes, as happened at a specific General Assembly, in order to be heard, a lady's got to yell. With what quickness the confrontation becomes two-sided in the eyes of the campers! "She shouldn't

of yelled at him. We agreed this was a nonviolent space." Well, then. It is too convenient that this space, a space in which a sexual assault or harassment is actually viewed as commonplace (due to its daily occurrence), should suddenly become vehemently defended in terms of nonviolence the moment a fellow is faced with a sneaky "raised volume" tactic that can be so harmful when used to confront patriarchal attitudes (Ch. 44, Para. 4).

Whittemore's narrative illustrates the contradictory nature of the Occupy Discourse. On the one hand, phrases like "non-violence," were used by patriarchal Occupy NOLA activists in the form of abstract common sense, employed so as to defend male activists' privilege by perpetuating unquestioned norms of conduct that facilitated patriarchal authority. However, Whittemore places a critical inflection on the phrase "non-violence," disarticulating the term from its positioning within the Occupy Discourse as defined by patriarchal activists. By contrast, Whittemore uses the concept to clarify the structural inequalities present in the Occupy NOLA tent city, thereby constructing an alternative interpretation of the Occupy Discourse characterized by a critical good sense.

4.3. Positivity and Negativity

Given how organic, macro-scale structures constantly impede upon the practices of prefigurative activists, I assert that concepts such as "prefigurative politics" refer not to positive (i.e. self-sufficient and actually-existing) entities, but rather to negative processes that exist primarily in the form of their own negation. The present section will seek to elaborate this statement, and to unveil some of its implications. The concepts of "positivity" and "negativity" have deep roots in dialectical theory, and serve as important conceptual tools by which activists can problematize Occupy Vancouver's imbrication in structures of domination. In his well-known study of Hegel's dialectical theory, the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1941) offers a description of negativity from which we can begin to clarify how these macro-scale social structures impeded upon tent city life:

Whatever the enduring unity of being "for itself" may be, we know that it is not a qualitative or quantitative entity that exists anywhere in the world, but is rather the negation of all determinates. Its essential character is therefore negativity; Hegel calls it also "universal contradiction," existing as it does "by the negation of every existing determinateness." It is "absolute negativity" or "negative totality." This unity, it appears, is such by virtue of a process wherein things negate all mere externality and otherness and relate these to a dynamic self. A thing is for itself only when it has posited (*gesetzt*) all its determinates and made them

moments of its self-realization, and is thus, in all changing conditions, always “returning to itself (p. 141-142).

Marcuse’s writing is verbose – though not nearly as verbose as Hegel’s! – but his meaning is easy enough to explain. Insofar as any entity – say, the OV General Assembly – can operate according to its own, innate dynamics, we can label it a “thing-for-itself.” This thing-for-itself would then exist as a “positive” and complete entity, the inner workings of which would not require any resources outside of that entity’s immediate control. If the Occupy Vancouver GA operated in a world where prefigurative political, economic, and kinship institutions were the norm, we could then speak of the General Assembly as a “thing-for-itself,” the inner dynamics of which would be reflected in and supported by OV’s broader institutional environment.

Inversely, insofar as an entity is not self-sufficient – insofar as the General Assembly’s prefigurative aspirations were foreclosed by its institutional context of patriarchy, capitalism, and the state - then we can only speak of an entity as a “thing-in-itself.” This is an entity that exists primarily “in the form of its own negation” – as a process the full realization of which is prevented by factors beyond said entity’s full control. This entity, then, would constitute an example of what dialectical theorists label “negativity,” and its very existence would imply a contradictory relationship between said entity’s positive, actually-existing status as a thing-in-itself, as well as its negative existence as a foreclosed potentiality – i.e. as a denied thing-for-itself.

But if a thing-for-itself is an entity that operates according to its own, endogenous dynamics, then we need concepts that can distinguish these dynamics from external sources of influence that impede a potential thing-for-itself from realizing its potential. The need for such concepts brings me to two terms that I consider some of the most important - as well as some of the most misrepresented and misunderstood - concepts in sociological theory. I speak of the concepts "essence" and "appearance." In my interpretation of these terms, I abide by the definitions offered by Theodor Adorno in his *Negative Dialectics* (1973), which emphasizes an ontology that resembled what later theorists would label “critical realism” – an approach that posits a clear distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, as described in my second chapter (p. 171). As such, Adorno characterizes “essence” not as a conceptual representation of an entity’s

true being, but as an objective reality that exists in the form of being denied. From this perspective, the concepts of essence and appearance

...are maintained in negative dialectics, but their directional tendency is reversed. Essence can no longer be hypostasized as the pure, spiritual being-in-itself. Rather, essence passes into that which lies concealed beneath the façade of immediacy, of the supposed facts, and which makes the facts what they are. It comes to be the law of doom thus far obeyed by history, a law the more irresistible the more it will hide beneath the facts, only to be comfortably denied by them... This essence too must come to appear like Hegel's: swathed in its own contradiction. It can be recognised only by the contradiction between what things are and what they claim to be... But the dialectics of essence, as of something which in its way, so to speak, simultaneously is and is not, can by no means be resolved as it is by Hegel: in the unity of the producing and produced mind" (p. 167-168).

According to Adorno's interpretation, "essence" is not an a priori category that can be deduced from the world of ideas. Indeed, Adorno's use of the concept "essence" is not essentialist, and has nothing to do with privileging certain causal forces – e.g. class, Man, the state - a priori. Rather, essence exists objectively, and can only be understood through an inductive research method that analyzes reality through what Adorno labelled a "constellation" of interrelated concepts (p. 163). Furthermore, as essence possesses an objective reality, it exerts a causal effect on the processes that are responsible for denying it, just as the foreclosed realization of the GA's norms exerted a causal effect on activists by generating conflict within the General Assembly. These effects derive from an essence's contradictory relationship with appearance – that is, with the various forces (e.g. patriarchy and the nation-state) that encroach upon an essence (e.g. the social structure of the GA), hindering the realization of its endogenous dynamics, norms, interests, and desires.

I will now argue that negativity is an emergent property of positivity, and therefore that the two poles of the negativity/positivity dyad are deeply interconnected and mutually dependent. To do so, I introduce two concepts developed by the critical realist Roy Bhaskar: namely, "nominal absences" and "real absences." For Bhaskar (2008), "absence" is a term that is closely synonymous with negativity, and is

Understood to include non-existence anywhere anywhen. It is systematically bipolar, designating absencing (distanciating and/or transforming) process as well as simple absence in a more or less determinate level-/context-specific region of

space-time...It includes, but is far from exhausted by, the past and outside. It is the central category of dialectic, whether conceived as argument, change or the augmentation of (or aspiration to) freedom, which depend upon the identification and elimination of mistakes, states of affairs and constraints, or more generally ills – argued to be absences alike (p. 393).

Absence, in other words, can be defined variously as A) something that does not exist, or B) the process by which something ceases to exist (as I would “absent” an apple by eating it). There is, however, a further distinction that Bhaskar makes between “real” and “nominal” absences. Here, I quote the somewhat more accessible language of critical realist Andrew Collier: “Real absences constrain us to recognize them; nominal absences can be expressed by true statements...but these tell us nothing that could not have been said by positive statements” (Collier, 2001, p. 301). Real absences, in other words, are absences that must be explained if we are to understand the operations of the objective world; nominal absences, by contrast, are superfluous, and lack any explanatory power. Here, we can differentiate between A) the “real” absence of equitable and inclusive decision-making structures at OV, and B) the “nominal” absence of, say, dinosaurs from the tent city grounds. Whereas the conflicts between OV activists cannot be understood without reference to the former, the absence of dinosaurs demonstrates no explanatory power in relation to Occupy Vancouver; indeed, the dynamics of OV can be suitably described without mentioning extinct prehistoric species of any kind. As such, these latter absences were merely “nominal.”

Having distinguished between real and nominal absences, I am in a better position to argue that negativity – and, in particular, real [that is, explanatory] negativity - is the emergent property of positivity. For, it is only possible to distinguish real from nominal absence/negativity with reference to positive, actually-existing material structures. That “hunger” can indicate a real absence of food is only true because the positive biological structures of our bodies operate in such a way that food is required for their operation. Or, more pertinently: the fact that activists could experience the absence of inclusive decision-making structures at OV was only possible because the General Assembly was designed such that inclusive norms were required for it to function properly and in a manner that was expected and desired by most OV activists. In both of these cases, the fact that an absence demonstrates explanatory relevance – as opposed

to being nominal and superfluous – is determined, in the first instance, by the structuration of positive, actually-existing entities.

Nevertheless, demonstrating that [real] negativity is the emergent property of positivity does not imply that the former is reducible to the latter. That the body needs food does not explain why we crave tacos as opposed to tofu. That the OV General Assembly required equitable and inclusive social structures in order to function properly does not tell us, in any absolute detail, what social structural changes might have been required to adequately realize OV's prefigurative aspirations. Perhaps OV needed mandatory anti-oppression training for its facilitators. Or perhaps it needed to dramatically reduce the time activists spent deliberating in large groups facing the Art Gallery stage, instead relying more on small, spatially dispersed discussion groups. Or perhaps the dynamics of OV would have only expressed true equality and inclusivity were patriarchy, white privilege, capitalism, and the nation-state abolished tout court. Or perhaps some combination of these strategies would have been best. Regardless, merely observing how positive social structures operate is not sufficient to answer these questions regarding negativity; any substantive exploration of the real absences influential at Occupy Vancouver would have entailed a process of trial and error by which activists could have ascertained the proper functioning of OV as a thing-for-itself. Indeed, insofar as negativity cannot be explained away by positivity, our attempts to theorize alternative positivities – in the form of utopias or models for prefigurative institutions – can only be pursued in a manner that is cautious, provisional, and dialogical. Before the incomprehensibility of negativity, our theories must remain ever humble.

I have described the emergent relationship between negativity and positivity, but my analysis has remained at a fairly high level of abstraction. Once again, Gramscian concepts can help activists apply these concepts more concretely, in this case by clarifying their relevance to the topic of political identity formation. For Gramsci, "hegemony" designated a collective subject that was predicated on both positive and negative attributes. On the one hand, Gramsci characterized hegemony as a negative social force – that is, as an attempt to aggregate a plurality of social forces under a common identity, resulting in a collective subject that was punctuated by contradiction (1971, p. 366). On the other hand, Gramsci clarified that the identities, ideologies, and

interests constituting hegemony were not arbitrary, but had to be grounded in specific material (i.e. economic) forces that pre-dated hegemony in its more conjunctural, political, and ideological form. These material forces were positive in that they granted hegemony a relatively fixed and pre-determined class character (p. 432). As such, Gramsci asserted that any expression of hegemony was ultimately led by an organized force that was unified and defined by its position vis-a-vis the relations of production (p. 161). This core economic group, in turn, propagated its ideological influence so as to cultivate an “historical bloc” – the contradictory and unstable alliance of forces that provided the conditions of existence for hegemony in its more strictly economic and organized sense (p. 366).

In his book *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis* (2002), the critical realist Jonathan Joseph has elaborated what he labels a “hegemonic project” – a concept that can help us apply Gramsci’s theories of collective subjectivity in a less class-reductive fashion. Joseph describes his formulation thus:

Hegemonic projects reflect this stratification in that they recognize that classes are not homogenous, but need to be brought together and unified. Hegemonic projects represented an attempt to construct alliances or blocs out of a diverse range of social groups and agents, each with different aims and interests, but this makes it all the more necessary to look beyond the actions of these groups and examine the various social structures and objective conditions that give rise to these divergent groups and interests. Hegemony may develop the process and modify, even help determine social agents, but it is not the primary origin of the differences between social groups and interests. Hegemony may take up and articulate these differences in various ways, but it acts upon a pre-existing raw material that is already stratified and differentiated because of its place in the nexus of social relations (p. 32).

According to this interpretation, hegemonic projects possess some degree of pre-existing unity based on a shared structural position, and this unity serves as a core around which the hegemonic project seeks to construct an historical bloc, which is itself based on an irreducible plurality of social forces.

Importantly, I contest Joseph’s Marxist-Leninist approach to activism, which solidly grounds social change in a proletariat directed by a vanguard party (see, for instance, p. 214-218). However, I would assert that the concept of “hegemonic project” can be decoupled from Joseph’s basis in Leninist vanguardism (p. 218) and rendered

more conducive to prefigurative activism. For, there is nothing about the concept of “hegemonic project” that grounds it in a necessary class character. Indeed, my arguments concerning the macro-structural realities of patriarchy and white supremacy suggest that there is nothing to prevent these structures from constituting the intersecting foundations on which a hegemonic project might derive its unity and common structural interests.

Take, for example, the organized group of activists who constituted OV’s facilitators. As described in Chapter Two, this group of predominantly white and cis-male activists demonstrated disproportionate organizational and decision-making power vis-à-vis the General Assembly, and attempted to propagate an interpretation of the Occupy Discourse that reflected its structural interests. These interests, in turn, derived their character from facilitators’ relatively homogenous positioning vis-a-vis structures such as patriarchy and white supremacy. As such, I would argue that the OV facilitators embodied a hegemonic project – one unified not only by organic structural interests, but also by the conjunctural and localized capacity to access the GA’s networking and organizational resources, such as those entailed by participation in the General Assembly Committee. These organizational resources provided facilitators with an opportunity to set the agenda for the General Assembly, to construct a common identity and sense of collective interest, and to cultivate a coherent outlook regarding the GA’s decision-making procedures. These three organizational benefits, in turn, enabled the GA’s facilitators to steer the General Assembly in directions that reflected the interests and experiences of white, cis-male activists. Nevertheless, the facilitators never attained anything like a fully accepted hegemony; many feminist, houseless, and anti-racist activists questioned their domination over the GA process, even as they attempted to propagate discourses that universalized the interests of white, cis-men. These conflicts reflected the more negative aspect of hegemony, to which I now turn.

Despite his occasional protestations regarding hegemony’s necessary class character, Gramsci did not conceptualize hegemony as a cohesive subject united by pre-ordained structural interests. Indeed, Gramsci was highly critical of so-called “economist” approaches to Marxism that attributed collective subjectivity to the

mechanical workings of underlying economic structures.⁷ Gramsci labelled this conception of political agency "economic-corporate," and contrasted it with an "ethical-political" subject - that is, a collective subject characterized by a plurality of economic and extra-economic interests united by a common ideology and world-view (p. 56, 161). Far from being pre-ordained by structural commonalities, the ethical-political character of hegemony was constructed through ideological articulation and political leadership. As such, Gramsci assumed that hegemony would be based on diverse - even on conflicting - identities and structural interests, which could only be provisionally totalized in the form of a collective subject. Describing this perpetually-negative element of Gramsci's thought, Marxist historian Martin Jay (1984) writes:

Instead of a meta-subject at the beginning of the process, who creates the totality expressively, there is an intersubjective totalization which is to be completed in the future, if at all. The ground of that totalization is no less cultural than economic. In fact, it entails the achievement of a linguistically unified community with shared meanings (p. 159).

In other words, Gramsci's collective subject was not so much economic or structural as linguistic and ideological. While Gramsci asserted that a given historical bloc was necessarily grounded in a class core, this core could only unite a historical bloc by constructing a common political and ideological identity, which necessarily transcended the interests entailed by the relations of production. Nevertheless, the consent that unified a historical bloc was not purely symbolic in nature, but required that a core economic group sacrifice some of its economic interests in order to satisfy an historical bloc's material needs (Gramsci, 1971, p. 205).

To demonstrate this negative aspect of hegemony, I will illustrate how the hegemonic project comprising white and cis-male GA facilitators was rooted within a corresponding historical bloc, which provided a necessary degree of support to those serving on the General Assembly Committee. Indeed, most Occupy Vancouver activists granted a certain degree of legitimacy to the practices of the GA facilitators who, despite their shortcomings, did reside over a relatively functional General Assembly process that

⁷ For examples of Gramsci's antipathy towards determinist and economist approaches to social change, see Gramsci's notebooks labeled *Some Problems in the Study of the Philosophy of Praxis* (Gramsci, 1971, p. 381-418) and *Critical Notes on an Attempt at Popular Sociology* (p. 419-473).

sufficiently served the needs of many GA participants. However, as a hegemonic project in need of a corresponding bloc of supporters, the GA facilitators were compelled to make concessions to the broader OV population, not all of which shared the perspectives or interests held by white cis-males. Examples of these concessions were manifold, and would include the hegemonic project's partial attempts to A) recruit facilitators from marginalized groups, B) to keep to a progressive stack⁸, and C) to implement a modestly anti-oppressive and equitable facilitation agenda, whereby overt expressions of misogyny – e.g. a cis-male activist interrupting a female activist during a General Assembly - were often (though not always) criticized by facilitators. It is true that, by implementing these concessions, the white and male activists of the General Assembly Committee sacrificed some of their structurally-specific interests within the institutions of patriarchy and white supremacy. However, in doing so, the GA facilitators secured the support of many GA participants, whose consent the facilitators needed in order to reproduce the hierarchies entailed by the General Assembly process.

These positive and negative aspects of hegemony highlight an important feature of Occupy Vancouver; namely, at no point did the Movement constitute a pre-given or cohesive collective subject. Although certain, frequently oppressive structural interests served as a positive bedrock for the Movement's cohesion and organization, Occupy Vancouver was ultimately riven with structural contradictions and interpersonal conflicts. As such, the term "Occupy Vancouver" - although an important and convenient label - was ultimately an empty signifier. Far from referring to a positive, unified, actually-existing subject, "OV" referenced an absence and a potentiality, the realization of which depended on the political, ideological, and pedagogical projects of activists.

4.4. The Relational Character of Dialectical Categories

Absence, contingency, and abstract universality are the emergent properties of positive, necessary, and concrete social structures; as such, neither of the three binaries

⁸ At Occupy Vancouver, a "stack" entailed the list of GA participants waiting to speak at any given time. A "progressive stack" was one in which facilitators (or specialized "stack-keepers") would prioritize activists who either A) belonged to a marginalized group, or B) had spoken least on the issue at hand.

discussed in the current chapter can be dichotomized. They must instead be theorized dialectically - that is, as mutually-constitutive terms that retain irreducible causal properties. However, these binaries are not only emergent; they are also relational. To the extent that they are based on underlying social structures, these binaries possess a causal force only when enacted by concrete, socially-specific agents. As such, any attempt to characterize these dialectical categories in a manner that overlooks the specific identities of gendered, raced, and classed agents must necessarily remain abstract and incomplete (at best), or fall victim to essentialist and reductive theorizing (at worst). I will therefore spend a moment to illustrate how the aforementioned dialectical categories are relational, treating each binary in turn.

Firstly, what confronts one agent as necessary (and therefore as objective and structurally determined) might face another agent as contingent (and therefore as accessible to subjective influence and control). For example, OV activists' varying degrees of race-, gender-, and class-based privilege determined how amenable the General Assembly's norms were to said agent's influence. While OV's decision-making structures were readily accessible to most formally educated white cis-men, activists of marginalized genders and ethnicities - or those lacking access to permanent housing or formal education - often confronted the General Assembly's social structures as durable objects resistant to change. However, the GA's inaccessible objectivity vis-a-vis more marginalized activists was only possible because privileged activists faced these same structures in a more contingent mode - that is, as flexible and modifiable extensions of their subjective being.

Secondly, a concept that faces one agent as an abstract universal divorced from everyday practice might face another agent as concrete and reflective of practical experience. The Occupy Discourse provides a good example of this relational affinity between concrete and abstract universality. The Occupy Discourse, as it was enacted and propagated by the OV General Assembly's facilitators, often reflected the experiences and interpretive standpoints of privileged activists. To these generally white, cis-male, and formally educated facilitators, the Occupy Discourse comprised a concrete universal that articulated meanings reflective of facilitators' privileged standpoints. However, this same interpretation of the Occupy Discourse faced marginalized GA participants in the form of an abstraction - that is, as a discourse that failed to articulate

concrete life experiences, and which was instead mediated by the assumptions of white, formally educated cis-men.

Thirdly, what faces one agent as a real and influential absence might face another agent as a nominal absence with little explanatory relevance. On the one hand, the absence of more equitable and inclusive decision-making institutions faced marginalized OV activists as a real absence – one that carried a great deal of causal efficacy in determining the day-to-day conflicts over inclusivity that were endemic to OV's general assemblies. On the other hand, OV's decision-making structures faced privileged activists in the form of a nominal absence; the actions of the GA's facilitators could be explained without [as much] reference to the absent structures of equitable decision-making that proved so influential to more marginalized activists. Indeed, the nominal character that such absences possessed in relation to privileged activists was a primary reason that these absences could go unnoticed by white and male standpoints.

Therefore, while each of the aforementioned binaries is predicated on objective realities, their causal and explanatory relevance varies according to the identities, perspectives, and life histories possessed by particular agents. To speak of dialectical categories as if they retained a reality abstracted from human agency or concrete human practice is therefore fallacious⁹. Nevertheless, many contemporary theories of prefigurative politics engage in precisely such conceptual abstraction, according to which agency is viewed as causally superfluous in relation to underlying structural dynamics. In the next chapter, I will direct my conceptual framework at two such theories, intending that the contrast should clarify and validate my arguments thus far.

⁹In claiming that dialectical categories depend upon human agency, I speak only of categories that are used to analyze specifically *social* structures. As per critical realists like Andrew Collier (2001, p. 302-304), I submit that natural, non-human structures demonstrate dialectical dynamics that are independent of human agency, even if the understanding of these objective forces is necessarily mediated by subjective human consciousness.

Chapter 5.

The Poverty of Prefigurative Philosophy

The present chapter explores a deep dissatisfaction I've long felt towards many of the radical, politically-engaged theories of prefigurative politics that are currently in vogue amongst both university-based theorists and prefigurative activists. My arguments are based on the assertion that distinctly "radical" social theories should be judged according to their ability to help activists identify and resolve the many, everyday problems entailed by social movement participation. In former chapters, I have described what some of these problems looked like at Occupy Vancouver: a non-exhaustive list would include the reproduction of patriarchy and white supremacy within the General Assembly; the marginalization of houseless activists; and the capacity for exclusive social networks to form in such a way as to arrogate disproportionate organizational power to particular activists. Each of these problems foreclosed the prefigurative dynamics of Occupy Vancouver, inhibiting its activists from fully realizing their emancipatory aspirations. A radical theory of prefigurative politics should help activists identify concrete solutions to these problems in a manner that empowers us to problematize questions of privilege, inclusion, and participation.

For reasons that I will elaborate below, I do not find many contemporary, university-based theories of prefiguration to be particularly helpful when judged by these criteria. Indeed, I often find them to embody highly abstract conceptual frameworks that - while adept at generating clever-sounding neologisms, at caricaturing pre-existing theories, and at issuing totalizing statements regarding ontology, history, and social change - tend to be extremely limited in their capacity to inform activists' concrete practice. Given these theoretical lacunae, my own attempts to theorize prefigurative activism have often sidestepped prefigurative social movement theory entirely, relying instead on scholars of gender and intersectionality; on English critical realists, and on

theorists belonging to the somewhat antiquated tradition of dialectical, materialist, and humanist Marxism.

In the current chapter, I aim to justify my ambivalence towards contemporary theories of prefiguration, and to do so with reference to the dialectical criteria introduced in former chapters. To demonstrate my claims, I will engage with two “mono-causal” theories of prefiguration that identify social change with a single set of explanatory factors. In particular, I will critique A) Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theory of hegemony, which identifies social dynamics with the semiotic structures entailed by discourse, and B) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s theory of the multitude, which posits social change as deriving from a distinct form of “immaterial” economic production, to be elaborated below.

I have chosen these two theories due to the ways in which they conceptualize the binaries of A) necessity/contingency, B) negativity/positivity, and C) abstract universality/concrete universality. While each theory views the aforementioned binaries reductively – such that one term is viewed as superfluous in relation to the other – the two theories nevertheless emphasize opposing terms of each dyad, thereby enabling me to demonstrate a wide variety of conceptual fallacies that characterize contemporary theories of prefiguration. To demonstrate the methodological and practical problems entailed by these various forms of reductivism, my analysis will proceed as follows. I will first provide an explanation and critique of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, which reifies contingency, negativity, and abstract universality by severing these terms from any basis in positive, objective, and concrete social structures. Subsequently, I will argue that Hardt and Negri’s immanentist theory reifies necessity and positivity, while falsely claiming to theorize a concrete universal by subsuming all plurality under unitary economic categories. Indeed, Hardt and Negri tend to treat contingency, negativity, and discourse as theoretically irrelevant when compared to the underlying structural dynamics entailed by the labour process. Finally, after reviewing the many differences between these two theoretical approaches, I will assert that the forms of reductivism embraced by each theory are predicated on a similar basis in anti-humanism - a view that treats human agency as causally irrelevant and reducible to underlying discursive or economic structures. I will argue that Laclau, Mouffe, Hardt, and Negri’s common antipathy towards human agency correlates with their methodological inability to theorize

A) the concrete, socially-situated practices that form the basis of prefigurative activism, and B) the ways in which multiple forms of social structure – including both discursive and economic structures - intersect to provide the normative environment in which activists engage in prefiguration.

5.1. A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory

I begin with the discourse theory formulated by post-Marxist deconstructionists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In a widely cited work entitled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS), Laclau and Mouffe (2001) attempted to articulate a theory of hegemony unburdened by the forms of “classism,” “statism,” and “economism” that, in Laclau and Mouffe estimation, compromise Marxist thought (p. 177). Based on a highly selective appraisal of the Marxist tradition, Laclau and Mouffe identify Gramsci as the Marxist farthest removed from these problematic theoretical tendencies. In particular, Laclau and Mouffe credit Gramsci with theorizing “symbolic articulation” – a term that refers to

any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments*. By contrast, we will call *element* any difference that is not discursively articulated” (p. 105).

This concept of “articulation” – together with its corresponding ontology of discourse – constitutes, for Laclau and Mouffe, an important departure from the more economic forms of Marxism that attribute social change to the structural dynamics entailed by capitalism (p. 69). Whereas economic approaches to Marxism assume a fixed, objective, and pre-existing class interest underlying social change, articulation suggests a far more “contingent” view of social movement dynamics that derives from the fluid and antagonistic identities generated through discourse (p. 85). Nevertheless, even Gramsci is not entirely free of these economic tendencies:

For Gramsci, even though the diverse social elements have a merely relational identity – achieved through articulatory practices – there must always be a single unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and this can only be a fundamental class...Class hegemony [for Gramsci] is not a wholly practical result

of struggle, but has an ultimate ontological foundation...This is the inner essentialist core which continues to be present in Gramsci's thought, setting a limit to the deconstructive logic of hegemony (p. 69).

Laclau and Mouffe's attempt to evacuate Gramsci of his lingering basis in class- and state-essentialism constitutes the primary theme underlying the disparate arguments of *HSS*, and forms the basis for the discourse theory developed therein.

Necessity and Contingency: Laclau and Mouffe counter Gramsci's perceived class-essentialism by making a striking ontological assertion; namely, *HSS* rids hegemony of its essentialist character by embracing an ontology in which discourse is the only explanatory factor relevant to social theory. Here, Laclau and Mouffe explain their ontology in two consecutive passages:

Our analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms: a) that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence; and b) that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities (p. 107).

The main consequence of a break with the discursive/extra-discursive dichotomy is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition, and hence a major enlargement of the field of those categories which can account for social relations (p. 110).

In other words, Laclau and Mouffe deny that social analysis – or, indeed, human perception more generally - can differentiate between objective reality and discourse. As such, everything that can potentially be known about reality is reducible to the signs, concepts, and meanings that constitute our discursive awareness.

Eager to refute charges of ontological idealism, Laclau and Mouffe make the following claim: "The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with the realism/idealism opposition" (p. 108). That is, *HSS* does not deny the existence of the objective, material world; only the fact that we can say anything meaningful about it. However, Laclau and Mouffe's protestations against idealism demonstrate little practical value, for reasons Marxist theorist Norman Geras (1988) has elaborated:

[Laclau and Mouffe] formally affirm the existence of objects external to thought, but the rest of what they say cancels this out, rubs it of any theoretical weight. For, once you try to give some content to these objects, you are dealing with their “being” rather than their “existence” and being is discourse-specific, discourse-relative. You cannot say anything *about* what exists outside thought, only that things do... (p. 55).

In other words, while Laclau and Mouffe admit the possibility that objective reality exists, they deny that we can make any claims upon this reality, or that it could possess explanatory relevance independently of the discourses through which it is understood.

Importantly, Laclau and Mouffe portray their discourse ontology as a refutation of structural determination, which *HSS* faults for Gramsci’s class essentialism. Instead, Laclau and Mouffe characterize their discourse ontology as a defence of contingency:

If, as is shown in the work of [deconstructionist Jacques] Derrida, undecidables [that is, contingency] permeate the field which had previously been seen as governed by structural determination, one can see [Laclau and Mouffe’s] theory of hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain. Deeper levels of contingency require hegemonic – that is, contingent – articulations, which is another way of saying that the moment of reactivation means nothing other than retrieving an act of political institution that finds its source and motivation in an undecidable terrain (xi).

The dichotomy between "structural determination" and "contingency" is reproduced in these passages full force, with Laclau and Mouffe clearly vouching for the latter. As such, structural determination warrants virtually no analysis in Laclau and Mouffe’s writing, which instead emphasizes the contingent character of discourse – a contingency that, in spurning structural determination, is seen as sidestepping the forms of class essentialism characteristic of Gramsci.

Laclau and Mouffe's antipathy towards class- and state-essentialism is valuable and well-founded. However, by asserting that our knowledge of objectivity is reducible to discourse, Laclau and Mouffe have foreclosed many of the critical realist and dialectical concepts that I have introduced in Chapters Two, Three and Four - concepts that clarify how structural factors systematically privilege certain voices, identities, and dispositions at the expense of others, all in a manner irreducible to agents' discursive awareness. Referencing Laclau and Mouffe in all but name, socialist feminist Nancy Fraser (1997) criticizes this virtual lack of institutional or structural analysis in what she labels “deconstructive antiessentialism”:

Deconstructive antiessentialists appraise identity claims on ontological grounds alone. They do not ask, in contrast, how a given identity or difference is related to social structures of domination and to social relations of inequality. Nor do they ask what sort of political economy would be required to sustain nonexclusionary identities and antiessentialist understandings of difference (p. 183).

The lack of institutional awareness in Laclau and Mouffe's writing is not an oversight, but results from their ontological premises regarding the mono-causal character of discourse. As we can say nothing meaningful about the objective world in a manner that transcends our discursive frames, concepts highlighting structure lose all relevance. Categories such as "norm circle," "social structure," and "strategic-selectivity" each entail an objective and material referent, the causal dynamics of which are irreducible to discourse. By evacuating objectivity from their ontological framework, Laclau and Mouffe ensure that these conceptual tools lose their analytical and critical potency, severely hampering our ability to theorize how essentialism occurs not only in theory, but also in the concrete practices of activists and other agents.

Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe not only ignore structural analysis in their writing; they go so far as to reject the concept of "structural contradiction," as it references an objective relation that is ultimately describable with reference to discourse (p. 124). As such, Laclau and Mouffe prefer to speak of "social antagonisms," which refer not to objectively opposed structural interests, but to the conflicting symbolic content entailed by discourse (p. xiii-xiv). The resulting conceptual framework views all historical change – including the economic dynamics traditionally theorized by Marxist theory – as resulting from discourses and their corresponding antagonisms, with Laclau and Mouffe asserting that "The "winning over of agents to their historical interests" is, quite simply, an articulatory practice which constructs a discourse wherein the concrete demands of a group – the industrial workers – are conceived as steps towards a total liberation involving the overcoming of capitalism" (p. 120). The possibility that these discursive dynamics are conditioned by objective and contradictory structural interests – interests that might very well precede agents' awareness - is thereby foreclosed.

Abstract Universality and Concrete Universality: Laclau and Mouffe's collective subject – which they reference with the term "hegemony" – is, at first glance, similar to Gramsci's. Although they evacuate Gramsci's concepts of their tendency to attribute a necessary class character to hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe share Gramsci's emphasis

on ideology, as well as his commitment to pluralism. Take, for instance, the following discussion of hegemony located in *HSS*:

What, in that case, is the specific universality inherent in hegemony? It results, we argue in the text, from the specific dialectic between what we call logics of difference and logics of equivalence. Social actors occupy differential positions within the discourses that constitute the social fabric. In that sense they are all, strictly speaking, particularities. On the other hand, there are social antagonisms creating internal frontiers within society. *Vis-à-vis* oppressive forces, for instance, a set of particularities establish relations of equivalence between themselves. It becomes necessary, however, to represent the totality of the chain, beyond the mere differential particularisms of the equivalential links. What are the means of representation? As we will argue, only one particularity whose body is split, for without ceasing to be its own particularity, it transforms its body in the representation of a universality transcending it (that of the equivalential chain). This relation, by which a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it, is what we call a *hegemonic relation* (xiii).

To phrase this in terms less inflated by academic jargon: In Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation, hegemony constitutes a form of discourse that A) comprises diverse signs united by a symbolic commonality, B) is represented by a "hegemonic relation" that, although existing as a particular sign within the hegemonic discourse, is able to serve a special function by representing the discourse in its entirety, and C) is united by a common antagonism towards signs that exist outside of the hegemonic discourse; to use my own example, one might consider the meaning that "Jew" held in its capacity to unify the discourses of Nazi Germany due to its status as an excluded Other. Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe make two important revisions to Gramsci's rendition of "hegemony;" namely, they posit that a hegemonic relation does not entail a necessary class character, and that hegemony might exist under the representation of multiple hegemonic relations (rather than being represented under the sole signifier of a dominant economic class) (p. 137-138).

At first blush, this appears a valuable – if somewhat wordy – framework for a non-reductive collective subject. However, given Laclau and Mouffe's antipathy towards objectivity, the resulting universal can only be abstract. For, as described in the last chapter, a universal is only "concrete" with reference to an objective reality experienced through agents' everyday social practices. The concreteness of a given hegemonic discourse can only be judged based on how effectively it articulates the complexity found

within the natural world - a complexity which, in turn, is measured according to how well it correlates with the practice-based standpoints of specific agents. However, Laclau and Mouffe leave us no way to make such a judgement, as their ontology "implies...that fundamental interests in socialism cannot be *logically* deduced from determinate positions in the economic process...there is no logical connection whatsoever between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the producers" (p. 84-85). As Laclau and Mouffe provide us with no qualifier, the reader can only assume that the authors would make the same claim about the relationship between *any* structure (e.g. patriarchy) and *any* agent (e.g. female or transgender activists). As such – and quite remarkably, given the absence of any substantive empirical evidence – Laclau and Mouffe seem to be claiming that socially-structured human experience demonstrates no "logical" relationship to the concepts, desires, and ideologies that motivate political struggle. From this perspective, the concept of an epistemological standpoint would be superfluous, as our concepts and ideologies would demonstrate no relation to our life experiences. However, if the relationship between structural interests and discourse is an arbitrary one, we lack any ability to judge whether a universal like "hegemony" is concrete (and therefore conducive to a plurality of interests), or whether it is abstract (and therefore apt to reduce a plurality of interests under a unitary signifier that reflects the experiences of a particular social group). Assuming that I have successfully argued why such a judgement between abstract and concrete universals is critical for social movement activists, Laclau and Mouffe's position is shown to be both unsubstantiated and politically compromising.

Positivity and Negativity: Laclau and Mouffe posit hegemony as a fundamentally negative form of identity, pervaded by instability and fluidity, rather than by fixity and permanence. In particular, hegemony is predicated on

certain discursive forms [that], through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such. This impossibility of the real – negativity – has attained a form of presence. As the social is penetrated by negativity – that is, by antagonism – it does not attain the status of transparency, of full presence, and the objectivity of its identities is permanently subverted. From here onward, the impossible relation between objectivity and negativity has become constitutive of the social (p. 129).

For Laclau and Mouffe, the very act of articulating a common hegemonic discourse is based on the “constitutive” role of excluded signs against which the hegemonic discourse defines itself (Ibid.). Here, we can refer to my aforementioned example regarding the sign “Jew” and its relation to the discourses of Nazi Germany. Without this sign’s capacity to unite Nazi ideology under a common discursive antagonism (thereby constituting what Laclau and Mouffe label a “discursive chain of equivalency”) the discourses of Nazi Germany – which comprised a wide and conflicting array of socialist, racist, and nationalist symbols – would have lacked any means to cohere (xiii). As such, although signs like “Jew” were not internal to the hegemonic discourses of Nazi Germany, their absence as excluded symbols constantly affected these discourses and prevented them from forming a fixed and “sutured” identity.

However, Laclau and Mouffe *do* assert an element of positivity in their discourse ontology in the form of “nodal points:”

The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations – otherwise, the flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning. If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social only exists, however, as an effort to construct the impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, nodal points (p. 112).

Having described my critical realist approach to discourse in the former chapters, I will have an easier time clarifying the fallacies entailed by Laclau and Mouffe’s assertion regarding “nodal points.” It is undeniable that certain discourses are more durable and cohesive than others. For instance, the Occupy Discourse introduced in Chapter Two aggregated particular hand signals, phrases, practices, and norms under a common symbolic order that emphasized values of prefiguration and pluralism. This Occupy Discourse was both cohesive and highly resistant to change; although activists often debated what signs warranted inclusion in the Occupy Discourse, the discourse itself generally went unchallenged. However, in Chapter Two, I argued that the durability of the Occupy Discourse derived from the normative regulation provided by norm circles, which comprised the “causal mechanism” responsible for discursive cohesion, and which demonstrated an objective existence that was irreducible to discourse itself. I also related the patterned discourses of Occupy Vancouver to an underlying “discursive

selectivity," by which the GA's corresponding social structures privileged certain discourses over others. These objective and normative mechanisms afforded the Occupy Discourse its cohesion and durability.

Given Laclau and Mouffe's ontological assumptions, such causal mechanisms are theoretically irrelevant insofar as they condition agents' practices in a manner irreducible to discourse. However, we are then in a position to ask: what is the causal mechanism responsible for enabling nodal points to structure discourses? What mechanisms, endogenous to discourse, could be responsible for aggregating signs such that they demonstrate a certain degree of fixity? Laclau and Mouffe, writing at an immensely high level of abstraction, fail to offer any answers to this question. As such, their account of nodal points remains unconvincing, leaving Laclau and Mouffe unable to explain the many forms of positivity and discursive cohesion that structured the practices of Occupy Vancouver activists.

To summarize: If we ground social theory in the socially-situated struggles and experiences of prefigurative activists – a level of analysis at which Laclau and Mouffe rarely operate – it becomes far more difficult to overlook the many extra-discursive ontological variables that condition how essentialism occurs in everyday, social movement practice. Essentialism, after all, was rife at OV. Whenever the white and cis-male activists of Occupy Vancouver universalized their own perspectives, identifying these perspectives with Occupy Vancouver as a totality, they engaged in an essentializing act, whereby activists' highly diverse and internally-conflicting interests, viewpoints, and backgrounds were reduced to a false and abstract unity. However, nothing about this process was reducible to discourse; that the perspectives of white, cis-male activists came to dominate much of the General Assembly process was largely the result of material and structural factors; these conditioned which voices were heard, which voices could comfortably engage in the GA process, and which voices could most easily determine the norms by which the General Assembly operated. An ontology that discounts these structural and objective explanatory factors a priori fails to provide activists with the conceptual tools needed to identify how essentialism occurs not only in theory, but also in the concrete, everyday practices of social movement activists.

5.2. A Critique of Hardt and Negri's Immanentist Theory

I turn now to the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, two autonomist Marxists who, over the course of four co-written books, have formulated an “immanentist” theory of social change that emphasizes the causal power of “immaterial labour” – i.e. forms of labour that are material, but which result in “immaterial” products that include “knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (2004, p. 108). For Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour is the hegemonic form of labour in the contemporary global economy by virtue of its capacity to “transform the organization of production from the linear relationships of the assembly line to the innumerable and indeterminate relationships of distributed networks. Information, communication, and cooperation become the norms of production, and the network becomes its dominant form of organization” (p. 113). The hegemony of immaterial labour leads Hardt and Negri to identify immaterial production as the primary factor driving historical change. Negri clarifies this primacy in his article *Logic and Theory of Inquiry: Militant Praxis as Subject and Episteme* (2007):

The relationship between social movements and institutional change takes shape concurrently with the transformation of the very nature of movements. In this sense, the transition is *fundamentally* from the hegemony of material labour to that of immaterial labour, which is to say, the processes internal to the labour force that have transformed the forms of work, existence, and expression. The explanation for historical evolution is to be found within these ontological dimensions of labour. There would not be effective struggles unless they were locked in, linked to, and produced by this profound transformation of labour (p. 62).

In this passage, Negri asserts a mono-causal explanation for social change, whereby a particular type of social structure - namely, the structures responsible for regulating immaterial production – are presented as the force underlying the plurality of contemporary social struggles. Indeed, Negri explicitly forecloses the possibility that there could be “effective struggles” at all, unless these struggles first become “locked in, linked to, and produced by” the immaterial labour process (Ibid.).

In keeping with this mono-causal account of social change, Hardt and Negri use the concept of immaterial labour to elaborate an overarching structure of domination

(which they label “Empire”), as well as a cohesive emancipatory subject (“the multitude”).

I focus here on the latter concept, which Hardt and Negri (2004) define thus:

Political action aimed at transformation and liberation today can only be conducted on the basis of the multitude...the multitude is composed of a set of *singularities* – and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different...The multitude designates an active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common. The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity...but on what it has in common (p. 99-100).

As a collective subject defined by its basis in plurality and irreducible difference, the multitude is not merely a class category; rather, Hardt and Negri present the multitude as “a concept of race, gender, and sexuality difference. Our focus on class here should be considered in part as compensation for the relative lack of attention to class in recent years...” (p. 100-101). Nevertheless, the multitude's central dynamics, common interests, and means of integration are almost invariably discussed with reference to economic categories; for instance the integrating forces responsible for the multitude's existence are attributed to the circuits of immaterial production (p. 114). Indeed, despite much admirable rhetoric of pluralism and non-reducible difference, Hardt and Negri have, over the course of four co-written books, never theorized the multitude's central dynamics in categories independent of class and labour. As such, the multitude's capacity to articulate irreducible plurality remains perpetually unclear and undertheorized.

Contingency and Necessity: As demonstrated above, Hardt and Negri attribute historical change and social causation to underlying social structures that regulate immaterial production - a form of production which, once again, is a thoroughly material process that is distinguished as "immaterial" only with reference to its products (2004, p. 108). As such, Hardt and Negri emphasize structural determination over contingency in their account of social causation. Indeed, there is remarkably little in Hardt and Negri's writing on the contingent factors of discourse, human agency, or socially-situated expressions of political contestation. Although both authors speak freely about languages, ideas, and other products of "immaterial labour," these phenomena are consistently presented as deriving from underlying material processes (see, for instance, p. 108-111). It is unclear what irreducible importance these contingent factors might

carry in Hardt and Negri's theoretical framework, beyond their capacity as outputs and inputs vis-a-vis the circuits of immaterial production.

This emphasis on structural determination at the expense of contingency plays a major role in Hardt and Negri's account of how social movements form, cohere, and engage in coordinated actions. For Hardt and Negri, each of these social movement dynamics are seen to bypass political, organizational, and discursive forms of articulation, instead resulting from underlying structural factors which render more contingent sources of movement cohesion irrelevant. Take, for instance, the following passage from *Empire* (2000):

the model of the horizontal articulation of struggles in a cycle is no longer adequate for recognizing the way in which contemporary struggles achieve global significance...Perhaps the incommunicability of struggles, the lack of well-structured, communicating tunnels, is in fact a strength rather than a weakness – a strength because all of the movements are immediately subversive in themselves and do not wait on any sort of external aid or extension to guarantee their effectiveness...*Empire* presents a superficial world, the virtual center of which can be accessed immediately from any point across the surface. If these points were to constitute something like a new cycle of struggles, it would be a cycle defined not by communicative extension of the struggles but rather by their singular emergence, by the intensity that characterizes them one by one. In short, this new phase is defined by the fact that these struggles do not link horizontally, but each one leaps vertically, directly to the virtual center of *Empire* (p. 57-58).

Hardt and Negri's colourful language obfuscates a glaring poverty of thought. For, according to the above passage, social movements are no longer characterized by "communicative extension" - that is, by the alliances that result from political and ideological struggle. Indeed, *Empire* suggests that social movements automatically converge upon a single, common enemy - i.e. "Empire" - in a manner that bypasses the need for discursive articulation, for agent-driven forms of mobilization, and for the cross-organizational alliance-building that more localized approaches to activism entail (Ibid.). According to this interpretation, social movements have little reason to construct political or ideological alliances across movements, for the simple reasons that the dynamics of social movements converge automatically, due to a shared foundation in the determining structures of immaterial production.

Given Hardt and Negri's emphasis on structural determinism, along with their virtual dismissal of contingency, it is unsurprising that Ernesto Laclau should prove one of the strongest critics of the "multitude." Referencing *Empire*, Laclau (2004) makes the following observation regarding Hardt and Negri's conclusions:

What we are told, anyway, is: 1) that a set of unconnected struggles tend, by some kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*, to converge in their assault on a supposed center; 2) that in spite of their diversity, without any kind of political intervention, they will tend to aggregate with each other; and 3) that they could never have aims that are incompatible with each other. It does not take long to realize that these are highly unrealistic assumptions, to put it mildly (p. 26).

Laclau is exaggerating in his critique, but not by much. On the one hand, Hardt and Negri never articulate Laclau's characterization in so many words. Nevertheless, I would agree that Hardt and Negri fail to provide any convincing account of how contingency, discourse, agency, and political contestation, each impact social movement dynamics in a manner irreducible to structural determination.

Interestingly, Hardt and Negri have responded to Laclau's criticisms - not by addressing them and incorporating them into an account of the "multitude," but by characterizing hegemony as a statist and oppressive force. Referencing Laclau's theory of hegemony, Hardt and Negri (2009) write:

Freedom and equality also imply an affirmation of democracy in opposition to the political representation that forms the basis of hegemony. Two instances of representation are most relevant here, which, upon analysis, turn out to be very closely related. First is the representation required to construct a people out of a multitude. A people, of course, as Ernesto Laclau explains brilliantly, is not a natural or spontaneous formation, but rather is formed by mechanisms of representation that translate the diversity and plurality of existing subjectivities into a unity through identification with a leader, a governing group, or in some cases a central idea. "There is no hegemony," Laclau makes clear, "without constructing a popular identity out of a plurality of democratic demands." The second instance of representation, which is most clearly seen at the constitutional level, operates a disjunctive synthesis between the representatives and the represented. The U.S. Constitution, for instance, is designed simultaneously to link the represented to the government and at the same time separate them from it. This separation of the representatives from the represented is likewise a basis for hegemony. The logic of representation and hegemony in both instances dictates that a people exists only with respect to its leadership and vice versa, and thus this arrangement determines an aristocratic, not a democratic, form of government, even if the people elect that aristocracy... (p. 304-305).

Unsurprisingly, Hardt and Negri continue, in the next paragraph, to offer their own concept of the multitude as the more pluralist and "democratic" conception of collective subjectivity as compared to hegemony (Ibid). However, Hardt and Negri's logic is fallacious, and their characterization of hegemony disingenuous. Indeed, It is difficult to know where to begin unravelling the ways in which the above passage conflates several, unrelated concepts; namely, A) Gramsci and Laclau's approach to hegemony, which, in various ways, is predicated on symbolic forms of representation that aggregate a plurality under common identities and signs, B) a heterodox and uncited interpretation of hegemony that equates the term with formal-governmental representation as exemplified by the U.S. Constitution, and C) "aristocratic" forms of government. Neither B nor C possesses any necessary relationship with A, and Hardt and Negri offer no textual or empirical evidence demonstrating why we should believe that such a relation exists.

Behind any good straw man argument resides a conceptual weakness; for Hardt and Negri, this weakness comprises their continuing failure to defend their concepts against Laclau's criticisms. In the above passage, as elsewhere, the authors sidestep any explanation of discursive, political, or organizational cohesion, and fail to account for contingent forms of articulation in any but the most abstract terms. To be sure, Hardt and Negri claim to adhere to a form of articulation that is not hegemonic (p. 167), but they say remarkably little regarding what such forms of non-hegemonic articulation might look like, nor about how they would differ from the forms of articulation entailed by [a charitable interpretation of] hegemony. Indeed, despite infrequent and unproblematized protestations regarding non-hegemonic forms of articulation, Hardt and Negri never seem to waver from their central claims regarding the structurally-determined character of social movement dynamics - an account which bypasses the need to theorize contingency, organization, discursive articulation, and the conflict-laden process by which common identities are created and preserved.

Abstract Universality and Concrete Universality: Hardt and Negri encounter a further contradiction when they attempt to theorize the multitude's basis in plurality. On the one hand, Hardt and Negri aspire to present the multitude as a highly diverse collective subject - what I have labelled a "concrete universal" - that comprises a complex and irreducible plurality of social forces. Indeed, Hardt and Negri are eager to attribute to the multitude a fundamental and irreducible plurality that derives its unity from the underlying

structural mechanics of immaterial labour, rather than with reference to the forms of symbolic and organizational articulation theorized by Gramsci and Laclau (2004, p. 99-101; 2010, p. 304-305). Hardt and Negri further assert that the multitude's basis in immaterial labour - from which the multitude derives its causal, motivational, and integrative dynamics - embodies struggles over gender, race, and several other matrices of oppression; as the "Multitude is a class concept...there are a potentially infinite number of classes that comprise contemporary society based not only on economic differences, but also on those of race, ethnicity, geography, gender, sexuality, and other factors" (p. 103).

Hardt and Negri's pluralist intentions are admirable, but their concepts betray a highly particular and problematic epistemological standpoint - one that seems to be comfortable addressing issues of sexuality and race only when these processes are theorized in economic terms. Indeed, while Hardt and Negri's *rhetoric* depicts the multitude as a plural and concrete universal, their *analysis* almost invariably references the multitude in economic terms such as "class," "production," "accumulation," and "labour" (Ibid.). Despite admitting the need to theorize the multitude from a variety of different perspectives (2004, p. 224-225), there is remarkably little in Hardt and Negri's oeuvre that theorizes the concept in terms that offer gender, ethnicity, or other extra-economic processes any degree of explanatory independence from economic categories. The activist, South End Press editor, and social theorist Michael Albert (2012) clarifies the problems entailed by Hardt and Negri's abstract and econocentric approach to pluralism:

Yes, advocates of multitude urge their desire to broaden economics so that it accounts for other dimensions of life. They say they want to address all forms of domination. But, despite these admirable desires, it is far more probable that piling all dimensions of life under a single concept emphasizing only production will underplay extra-economic variables at least as badly as [Marxist-Leninist claims regarding economic primacy], rather than elevating them (Ch. 5, Sec. 5, Para. 29).

In a seeming attempt to counter accusations of econocentrism from critics like Michael Albert, Hardt and Negri devoted a chapter of their third book, *Commonwealth* (2009), to analyzing "identity politics" – a label that, to Hardt and Negri, comprises a wide array of struggles concerning race, gender, and sexuality (p. 325-344). Whatever the chapter's merits in relation to Hardt and Negri's typical emphasis on class, its discussion of identity

politics demonstrates two informative lacuna. First, Hardt and Negri's label of "identity politics" is problematic, and reinforces the perspective that struggles over gender, race, and sexuality are somehow less "material" than those of immaterial labour – and this despite Hardt and Negri's brief and unproblematized protestation that "like other forms of property, identity maintains hierarchy primarily through social structures and institutions" (p. 329). Secondly – and quite remarkably, given the prevalence of these terms in the remainder of *Commonwealth* – concepts like "multitude," "Empire," and "immaterial labour" are notably absent, failing to appear even once throughout the chapter in question. The implication seems to be that Hardt and Negri are quite capable of discussing the irreducible dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality, but only if A) these topics are presented as struggles over identity, and B) these discussions bracket the concepts most central to Hardt and Negri's oeuvre – a rather damning criticism, given Hardt and Negri's aforementioned insistence that such concepts comprise categories of gender, sexuality, and race, just as comprehensively as those of class.

Positivity and Negativity: The analytical shortcomings of concepts like "multitude" and "immaterial labour" become most prominent in Hardt and Negri's most recent book *Declaration* (2012), in which the co-authors discuss the Occupy Movement (and several concurrent social movements) in characteristically general terms. By attributing the Occupy Movement's perceived cohesion to its foundation in immaterial production - particularly to its "common language" and "forms of cognitive labour" (Ch. 3, Sec. 2, Para. 34) - Hardt and Negri fail to address the Movement's many gender-, race-, and class-based divisions in any but the most abstract fashion. Nor do Hardt and Negri ever problematize how the "common languages" of the Occupy Movement were constantly riven by interpretive debates over the Occupy Discourse. The result is a highly attenuated account that universalizes a white and cis-male standpoint according to which exclusion, disagreement, and marginalization are explained away and reduced to the integrative powers of immaterial labour. For example, take the following, characteristically aseptic passage from *Declaration*:

More important are the modes of organization of the movements and, specifically, the ways they include differences. Horizontal, democratic assemblies do not expect or seek unanimity but instead are constituted by a plural process that is open to conflicts and contradictions. The decisions of the majority move forward through a process of differential inclusion or, rather, through the

agglutination of differences. The work of the assembly, in other words, is to find ways to link different views and different desires such that they can fit together in contingent ways. The majority, then, becomes not a homogenous unit or even a body of agreement but a concatenation of differences. Minorities are protected, therefore, not by being separated but by being empowered to participate in the process. Such a configuration allows us to leave behind notions of the general will, which rely on the wisdom of representatives, and instead to fashion politics democratically, according to the will of all (Ch. 3, Sec. 2, Para. 30).

As is characteristic of Hardt and Negri's abstract mode of theorizing, it is difficult to extrapolate where the two authors have gathered the empirical data required to validate such broad claims; Hardt and Negri provide readers with no evidence that they have spent time in any of the Occupy tent cities, and readers are not treated to any interviews or other forms of ethnographic observation that might give voice to the activists about whom Hardt and Negri so confidently write.

In the absence of substantive empirical evidence, Hardt and Negri's glowing praise of the Occupy Movement fails in an important respect; namely, the analysis in *Declaration* conflates absent potentiality with positive and verifiable fact. As such, Hardt and Negri's eagerness to recognize the Occupy Movement's emancipatory character leads them to make radical claims regarding the general assemblies' capacity for horizontality and pluralism – claims which may sound radical and satisfying, but which demonstrate little utility in clarifying the many divisions that prevented activists from realizing the Occupy Movement's emancipatory aspirations in practice.

This tendency follows from another problematic element in Hardt and Negri's immanentist ontology; namely, its assumption that causal forces only exist in the form of positive, actually-existing, and empirically-given facts. In this regard, Hardt and Negri have been strongly influenced by French social theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who, in works such as *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), have developed an ontology predicated on positive and "immanent" social forces (p. 25). In their co-written *Postmodern Theory*, dialectical theorists Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner (1991) summarize this tendency in Deleuze and Guattari's ontology, which

assert[s] that desire, like power for Foucault, is fundamentally positive and productive in nature, operating not in search of a lost object which would consummate and complete it, but out of the productive plenitude of its own energy which propels it to seek ever new connections and instantiations. Hence, desire

cannot be theorized in Hegelian, Freudian, or Lacanian terms as lack...and is better theorized as a kind of dynamic machine (p. 86).

According to these ontological tenets, negativity – the capacity for absent forces, latent potentialities, and "lack" to assert causal force – possesses no theoretical significance. For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Hardt and Negri, social change and collective subjectivity do not derive from needs and desires that are predicated on absences, the fulfillment of which is foreclosed by dominant institutions. Rather, social dynamics derive from positive, "machine-like" dynamics that exert a causal force independently of institutions such as capitalism, and which will presumably remain after capitalism's hypothetical downfall. In Hardt and Negri's work, this ontological emphasis is demonstrated most explicitly during discussions of the multitude:

A new sense of being is imposed on the constitution of Empire by the creative movement of the multitude, or really it is continually present in this process as an alternative paradigm. It is internal to Empire and pushes forward its constitution, not as a negative that constructs a positive or any such dialectical resolution. Rather, it acts as an absolutely positive force that pushes the dominating power toward an abstract and empty unification, to which it appears as the distinct alternative (2000, p. 62).

In other words, the multitude – together with its structural basis in the circuits of immaterial production – are, for Hardt and Negri, conceivable only in the form of positivity. That these concepts might exist as mere potentiality - the realization of which is foreclosed by such forces as capitalism, patriarchy, or white privilege - are prospects that Hardt and Negri are unable to theorize given their central ontological assumptions.

I am not alone in finding fault with the positive element underlying Hardt and Negri's immanentism. In his book *Change the World without taking Power* (2002), John Holloway critiques this tendency in Hardt and Negri's writing, which conflicts with Holloway's dialectical emphasis on negativity:

In [Empire], as in all of Negri's analyses, there is a clash of Titans: a powerful, monolithic capital ("Empire") confronts a powerful, monolithic "multitude." The power of each side does not appear to penetrate the other. The relation between the two sides is an external one, as is indicated, indeed, by the authors' choice of the word "multitude" to describe the opposition to capital, a term which has the grave disadvantage of losing all trace of the relation of dependence of capital upon labour (p. 104).

Here, Holloway criticizes Hardt and Negri's outlook regarding capital, which is said to face the multitude as an external relation - that is, in a manner whereby "capitalism" and the "multitude" are not mutually essential, and whereby the two forces could feasibly exist without the other. This outlook prevents us from viewing the multitude dialectically, as a process that exerts causal force not because it exists as a positive, pre-given entity, but because it is driven by unfulfilled needs and desires - needs and desires that are constantly foreclosed by the oppressive forces of capitalism, which survive only because they constrain these needs and desires, harnessing them in the service of profit.

I echo Holloway's sentiment concerning the multitude's dialectical imbrication in the circuits of capital, and would take these arguments further so as to locate the multitude within the contradictory, intersecting, macro-level social structures underlying patriarchy and white supremacy. In viewing the multitude as a positive, pre-given entity, Hardt and Negri fail to provide readers with any concepts that might indicate how the multitude is foreclosed, compromised, or otherwise negated by the sexist and racist practices of activists - practices which impede the full realization of the multitude's pluralist and prefigurative potential. Without the capacity to theorize the constraining influences articulated by each of these intersecting social forces, Hardt and Negri are compelled to analyze the pluralist tendencies of the Occupy Movement's general assemblies as a foregone conclusion. However, the highly contentious reality of the Occupy GAs resulted not only from positive and empirically-given factors, but also from causally influential absences, such as the absence of equitable and inclusive decision-making practices. As Hardt and Negri's ontological assumptions prevent them from conceptualizing such absences, concepts such as the "multitude" fail to conceptualize many of the most important dynamics characteristic of prefigurative movements such as Occupy Vancouver.

5.3. The Fallacies of Anti-Humanism

Clearly, the two theories under consideration differ in important respects. Firstly, whereas Laclau and Mouffe emphasize subjective discourses in their account of collective identity and social change, Hardt and Negri privilege the objective process of production - a thoroughly material process that, under contemporary conditions, is

characterized by the creation of “immaterial” products. Secondly, Laclau and Mouffe’s universal category of “hegemony” is fundamentally abstract – it has been formulated so as to bypass any determining influence derived from the objective, material world or its corresponding structural interests. By contrast, the multitude is characterized by Hardt and Negri as being fundamentally concrete, predicated on underlying structural forces that serve to integrate a plural collective subject without reference to the complicating subjective factors of discourse, hegemony, and symbolic articulation. Thirdly, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the constant negativity entailed by discourse, which they view as haunted by a symbolic incompleteness that can only attain provisional fixity in the form of symbolic “nodal points.” Inversely, Hardt and Negri posit the multitude as a collective subject that is fundamentally positive, deriving its integrative and motivational tendencies not from individuals’ absent wants and unmet needs, but from their positive and immanent desires.

However, for all of their differences, these theories share at least one assumption in common; namely, both theories conceptualize human agency as an epiphenomenon that is reducible to underlying structures. Indeed, according to these authors, human agency – along with the reflexive, socially-situated practice through which agency is expressed - is viewed as wholly determined by discourse (Laclau and Mouffe) or by the material structures entailed by immaterial production (Hardt and Negri). Take, for instance, the following passage from *Empire* (2000):

Spinoza denounced any understanding of humanity as an imperium in imperio. In other words, he refused to accord any laws to human nature that were different from the laws of nature as a whole. Donna Haraway carries on Spinoza’s project in our day as she insists on breaking down the barriers we pose among the human, the animal, and the machine. If we are to conceive Man as separate from nature, then Man does not exist. This recognition is precisely the death of Man (p. 91).

Or take the similar words expressed in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1983):

we make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production or industry, just as they do within the life of man as a species. Industry is then no longer considered from the extrinsic point of view of utility, but rather from the point of view of its fundamental identity with nature as production of man and by man (p. 4).

According to both of these passages, human agency is reduced to dynamics located within the natural world. Nor does agency possess any irreducible causal or explanatory power in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse ontology, according to which "Subjects cannot...be the origin of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible – as all "experience" depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility" (2001, p. 115). Precisely how we can properly speak of "social relations" without conceptualizing human agents who can be related socially is a question that Laclau and Mouffe never address.

The problems with this anti-humanist outlook are manifold, resulting in ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that are indefensible and detrimental to socially-engaged theory. *Ontologically*, Laclau, Mouffe, Hardt, and Negri's anti-humanism is based on false premises that dramatically simplify the field of causes relevant to social theory. In particular, each of the aforementioned statements concerning the epiphenomenal status of human agency is predicated on an important conflation of two, distinct arguments. The first argument concerns the fundamental imbrication of agents in both discourse (Laclau and Mouffe) and the natural world (Hardt and Negri). This assertion is not only true; it entails important political implications insofar as such statements remind us that agents' standpoints are constantly affected by power, privilege, ideology, and structural interests. The second, more problematic claim concludes that human agency is a mere epiphenomenon of these underlying forces, and possesses no irreducible properties distinct from discourse, social structure, etc. Nothing about this second claim necessarily follows from the first, and it is unclear how theorists like Laclau, Mouffe, Hardt, and Negri could provide concrete evidence demonstrating that agency is nothing more than an expression of underlying discursive or natural forces. However, if we abide by an emergentist ontology, the necessary coupling of these two claims – one defensible, the other fallacious - is shown to be illusory. Indeed, there is no contradiction entailed by viewing human agency as an emergent property of underlying material and discursive structures. Such an approach enables theorists to identify how human agency is deeply imbricated in discourse and the natural world, while nevertheless locating within agency an important, irreducible capacity to approach underlying structures in a critical and reflexive manner.

Epistemologically, Laclau, Mouffe, Hardt, and Negri foreclose any capacity for human agents to abstract concepts in a manner irreducible to underlying structural influences. In this sense, the term “epistemology” loses virtually all explanatory meaning for these theorists, as the thoughts, perspectives, and behaviors of individual agents are wholly determined by their positioning within extra-local discursive or material structures. In this sense, there is little to differentiate Hardt and Negri’s epistemology from the problematic “reflection epistemology” articulated in V.I. Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism* (1947), according to which agents’ perspectives are reducible to “the reflection of objects by our mind...[whereby] things exist outside us [and our] perceptions and ideas are their images” (p. 106). To the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism* – and, seemingly, to Hardt and Negri – human beings are little more than passive receptacles in which the natural world deposits information in the form of sense perception; our minds then “reflect” this world just as a mirror reflects an image. While Laclau and Mouffe theorize a different type of structure than do Hardt and Negri – emphasizing signs rather than the material world – the epistemological implications of their theory are similar. Here, too, we have agents whose existence is exhausted by their capacity to reflect underlying structures in a manner that is unidirectional and that allows for no causal force external to the structure in question. As with Hardt and Negri, Laclau and Mouffe lack any capacity to theorize how agents might be able to step back from these underlying structures, abstracting categories so as to reflect distinct standpoints, life histories, or situationally-specific motivations.

Methodologically, the dismissal of human agency leads these authors to reify discursive and economic structures, treating them as ontologically distinct from the agents who realize and enact these structures in practice. In the two theories under consideration, there is little evidence regarding how the structures regulating discourse or immaterial production serve to mediate the practices of concrete, socially-situated agents. Indeed, these structures are not treated as social relations at all, but as independent entities with causal powers that transcend and exist prior to the practices of agents. This abstract account of structure exacts a heavy methodological toll on Hardt and Negri’s immanentism and on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, as it translates into arguments that are bereft of ethnography, interviews, personal narrative, or any consistent engagement with concrete, empirical data. As such, neither theory succeeds

in offering activists a venue in which to articulate their own voices, unmediated by the highly academic standpoints demonstrated by the authors in question. Nor, for that matter, is it clear what explanatory relevance such agentic accounts would possess given that both theories dismiss human practice as an epiphenomenon of broad, macro-level structures, the dynamics of which demonstrate full explanatory power.

However, the reduction of human agency to the reified dynamics of discursive and economic structures is problematic for additional reasons. Namely, I will argue that it is largely to blame for Hardt, Negri, Laclau, and Mouffe's common adherence to simplistic, mono-causal ontologies that dramatically flatten the field of explanatory factors deemed relevant to prefigurative activism. My arguments on this score are necessarily hypothetical, as neither of the theories in question problematizes their mono-causal ontologies nor their reductive accounts of human agency. Nevertheless, the link between mono-causality and anti-humanism is easy enough to demonstrate on logical grounds. For, given an ontology that allows for human agency, both discourse and immaterial labour - together with any number of additional factors - can be attributed irreducible causal influence based on their capacity as co-existing social relations, which together form the institutional and normative horizon for social practice. The remainder of the present chapter will be devoted to elaborating this insight, upon which hinges my repudiation of the two theories under critique.

Human agency is a unique causal power, in that it can choose to enact any of several norms which, in their capacity as norm circles, exist as material and objective entities. Social structures – including those that regulate discourse and economic activity - constitute the field from which agents evaluate and choose which norms to enact. This process of evaluation entails that agents place a variety of available norms in a particular equivalential relation, such that (for instance) a norm underlying gender practices can be compared with a norm regulating productive activity. To put this argument more concretely, we can take the example of a white and cis-male GA facilitator who, over the course of a General Assembly, is given the opportunity to choose between either the formal, anti-oppressive norms of the General Assembly (e.g. “uphold a safe and equitable decision-making process”) or the patriarchal norms entailed by broader structures of domination (e.g. “talk over a female-identified facilitator so as to enforce your dominance within the structure of patriarchy”). In order for the activist in question to

decide between these two norms, their normative value – that is, the degree to which these norms motivate conformity – depends on how the norms are related according to some comparable standard.

My inspiration for this idea derives from Karl Marx's (1978) concept of "exchange value," which refers to the value a given commodity adopts when traded for another commodity (p. 315). Exchange value entails that two exchanged commodities articulate an equivalent value, which Marx describes in his magnum opus *Capital*:

Whether 20 yards of linen = 1 coat or = 20 coats or = x coats – that is, whether a given quantity of linen is worth few or many coats, every such statement implies that the linen and coats, as magnitudes of value, are expressions of the same unit, things of the same kind. Linen = coat is the basis of the equation (p. 315).

In these passages of *Capital*, Marx asserts that the only way for commodities to undergo exchange is through a common measure – i.e. "exchange value" - which allows commodities to be evaluated and traded.¹⁰ Returning to my argument regarding equivocal norms, we can speak of an "exchange value" that undergirds the many norms that compete for an agent's enactment. If patriarchal norms are deemed more deserving of conformity than the formal norms underlying GA deliberations, this is because a particular agent – assuming they were aware of the norms in question - identified in these two norms various quantities of an identical "value" in the form of normative pressure, and deemed the patriarchal norm as possessing more of said value than the norm endogenous to the GA. However, the decision between these two norms could only have been evaluated and judged based on a common measure of normative influence. Having placed competing norms in such an equivocal relationship, agents can then make judgements as to which norms to enact and which to ignore, all in a manner that allows the norms underlying plural social structures to interact through the medium of human agency. This agency, in turn, provides norms with the "exchange

¹⁰ I reference Marx's work not as a metaphor, but as a microcosm of the way in which norms in general tend to be evaluated, compared, and "exchanged" by agents. For, the monetary relationships and pricing mechanisms that Marx describes in *Capital* are ultimately reducible to underlying norms – that is, assuming we take "money" to reference anything other than metallic discs or numbers on a screen. Exchange value is only possible because there are norms (and norm circles) existing to enforce it. As such, insofar as the norms underlying exchange value can articulate an equivalent value, there are good prima facie reasons for extending this argument – and many additional arguments found within *Capital* - to norms that lack any immediate relationship to monetary pricing or economic activity.

value" through which they can exert a reciprocal and irreducible causal influence – an influence that is only made possible due to the mediating and evaluating powers of human agency.

Absent human agency, there is nothing that enables theorists to conceptualize how distinct social structures – such as those regulating discourse or immaterial production - might attain mutual influence. What, after all, would it look like for a discourse to interact causally with the structures of immaterial production, assuming we have removed human agency from the equation? As it stands, this question is unresolvable, and might even appear absurd. It is only by positing human agency – together with its capacity to evaluate, mediate, and choose between a plurality of structures – that we can speak of a multi-causal ontology in which several, distinct social forces operate in common by providing the institutional environment for human agency. As such, Laclau, Mouffe, Hardt, and Negri's common adherence to a problematic mono-causal ontology is not a random, topical, or preventable attribute of their corresponding theories, but rather possesses deep roots in the forms of anti-humanism that inform these authors' conceptual and ontological assumptions. A social theory that seeks to be logically consistent while retaining a multi-causal ontology is compelled, on some level, to admit the irreducible character of human agency, which stands as the only avenue through which social structures find expression.

Chapter 6.

By Way of Conclusion: A Eulogy to Praxis-Based Social Theory

I can think of no better way to initiate my conclusion than with the words of Karl Marx, who advocated a praxis-based research method whereby social analysis derived from agents' concrete, socially-situated practices. In the pages of his *Critique of The German Ideology* (1978), Marx issued the following claim regarding social theory:

The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they *really* are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will (p. 154).

I contest Marx's identification of material practice with specifically *economic* activity, but his methodological insights are sound. For Marx, social theory should be grounded in the actual activities and life-processes of human beings. Any social theory that systematically abstracts its conclusions from individuals' concrete practices will quickly devolve into "mystification" and "speculation."

Marx wrote *The German Ideology* in 1845 and 1846, but today its claims are more relevant than ever. Indeed, university-based scholars have lost none of their predilection to engage in mystifying research practices, as I have demonstrated with reference to a number of existing theories of prefigurative politics. To summarize three examples: In my introduction, I argued that Richard J.F. Day (2005) erroneously abstracted prefigurative social movements from their institutional environments, thereby obscuring how activists embody racist, sexist, and other oppressive practices that derive

from dominant civil and political societies. In Chapter Five, I argued that Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) assertions regarding the theoretical irrelevance of objectivity prevented them from clarifying how essentialism arises from activists' concrete practices. Subsequently, I claimed that Hardt and Negri's (2000; 2004; 2009; 2012) assumptions regarding a structurally-determined "multitude" neglected how social movements are sundered by gender-, ethnic-, and class-divisions, the reconciliation of which entails a process of political and ideological construction irreducible to immaterial labour. By abstracting their conclusions from the concrete practices of activists – as might be derived from ethnographic observation, interviews, or consistent empirical analysis of any kind - these theorists have overlooked some of the most important causal and explanatory factors characteristic of prefigurative politics.

In particular, the aforementioned theories have each committed a similar methodological error, whereby they have attempted to resolve the problems confronting social movements conceptually, without reference to the concrete experiences of activists. The result is a highly abstract argumentative strategy that derives its conclusions not from the practical needs of social movement participation, but from A) the caricatured presentation of existing theories such that they demonstrate fabricated weaknesses, and B) the invention of new concepts that are validated according to how effectively they transcend these [caricatures of] existing theory. Indeed, the ways in which these authors treat dialectical and Gramscian theory can be read in this light, according to which existing theories are presented as hopelessly outdated – even as oppressive and anti-thetical to prefigurative politics – thereby warranting fundamentally new philosophies, comprising fundamentally new concepts, which can then be used to theorize fundamentally new forms of social movements referenced with terms like "multitude" (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 99-100), "the new social movements" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 87), and "the newest social movements" (Day, 2005, p. 5).

This argumentative strategy leads to a major theoretical weakness; namely, by relegating theory to an abstract conceptual plane, these theorists validate their conclusions in a manner that is fundamentally tautological. The totalizing conclusions underlying Hardt, Negri, Laclau, Mouffe, and Day's arguments regarding prefigurative politics may appear radical, even as necessary antidotes for the weaknesses of dialectics, materialism, and Gramscian theory. However, their arguments only hold

weight if the reader accepts the premises by which these theorists have already defined their central concepts a priori. That is to say: We can accept Laclau and Mouffe's claim to have developed an anti-essentialist social theory – but only if we concede, without reference to empirical evidence, their assumptions regarding the theoretical irrelevance of objective and material reality. We can accept Hardt and Negri's assertions that the structural dynamics of immaterial labour will take care of the most glaring needs underlying social movement organization – but only if we accept the underlying assumption that political and ideological forms of articulation are irrelevant vis-à-vis structural determination. Finally, we can accept Day's remarks regarding the ability for prefigurative social movements to bypass political and civil society – but only if we accept that the institutions of civil and political society are superfluous and, by implication, incapable of undermining prefigurative social movements.

Each of these theorists, in their conceptual formulations, has resolved some of the most glaring obstacles to prefigurative activism – obstacles such as essentialism, the uncertain and contested nature of political articulation, and the hostile character of dominant institutions. However, these scholars have only resolved said issues *conceptually* and *theoretically* – that is, through the redefinition of existing concepts and through the invention of new ones. As such, they have merely overlooked and obscured the continuing problems that the material referents of these concepts pose to prefigurative activists *in practice*. After all, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse ontology does little to help clarify how objective structures constantly engender essentialism in activists' everyday activity. Nor do Day, Hardt, and Negri's various arguments regarding the pre-given and self-sufficient character of prefigurative social movements resolve the glaring obstacles that patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and the nation-state constantly pose for activists in movements like Occupy Vancouver.

In their conceptual formulations, each of these theories has implicitly committed a fallacy characteristic of philosophical idealism; namely, the assumption that material contradictions can be resolved via conceptual means, thereby obfuscating how these contradictions are perpetuated in practice. Marx condemned a similar attitude in the theories of the Young Hegelians, a group of philosophers with whom Marx associated in the 1840s. In *The German Ideology* (1978), Marx claimed

The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering” statements, are the staunchest conservatives... they are in no way combatting the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world...It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings (p. 149).

For Marx, the Young Hegelians’ “world-shattering statements” were useless in practice, because they were relegated to the world of concepts, bypassing the material world of concrete, practical life activity. As an antidote for this scholastic and idealist approach to theory, Marx implored that theorists “set out from real, active men [sic!], and on the basis of their real life-process...demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. (p. 154). That is to say, theory begins and ends with practice. Anything less is mystification.

I submit that the dominant approaches to prefigurative social movement theory fail to embody Marx’s call for a praxis-based research method that both derives from and informs activists’ concrete practices. Instead, theorists of prefiguration tend to analyze and discuss social movement practice through the mediation of university-based standpoints that obscure many of the explanatory factors relevant to prefigurative politics. Is this predilection towards abstract theory simply a coincidence - the result of fickle intellectual fashion? On the contrary, a dialectical materialist analysis would suggest the influence of underlying normative forces that systematically promote university-based theories that are abstract, scholastic, and politically impotent. Indeed, the neoliberal university exerts an array of normative mechanisms by which it discourages radical, politically-engaged, praxis-based social movement theorists from attaining funding, intellectual influence, academic acknowledgement, and career security.¹¹ As such, the analysis of prefigurative politics finds its logical extension in the attempt to transform the social structures on which the neoliberal university is based. Without such a transformation, radical social theory can retain only a negative reality vis-à-vis the contemporary university - emerging in brief and isolated spurts, but existing primarily in the form of its own negation.

¹¹ In recent years, perhaps the most prominent example of what we might label the “academic selectivity” of the neoliberal university relates to the anarchist ethnographer David Graeber, who was denied tenure at Yale University, likely for politically-motivated reasons. See Arenson, 2005.

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