

# Opportunity in Crisis: Alternative Media and Subaltern Resistance<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

It all started with an e-mail. The Canadian alternative cultural magazine, *Adbusters*, in communicating with its subscribers suggested a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to be staged on September 17, 2011 (Fleming, 2011). The call sparked the imagination of countless activists and activist groups around the world, eventually culminating in the transnational movement we now call Occupy (White, 2016). The massive mobilization was noteworthy because it succeeded in unifying disparate groups, fighting for many causes, under the banner of the "99 percent."

To propose that in a time of global crisis we might find opportunities for egalitarian social change might strike some as idealistic. However, our various crises - environmental, humanitarian, economic - are generating deep schisms in the global order, schisms that have the potential to awaken a dormant global class of the oppressed. Indeed, the UK student movement, Occupy, and the Toronto G20 protests in 2010 indicate the emergence of a new consciousness and a willingness to experiment with non-hierarchical methods of organization, tactics of autonomous self-organization, and a (social-)mediated approach to outreach and recruitment (Srnicsek & Williams, 2015; Fuchs, 2014b; Castells, 2012). While alternative media have acted as crucial sites for critical thought and expression, promoting the circulation of struggles, the business of social change is that of social movements themselves, through their on-the-ground creative action.

This chapter explores the role of alternative media in igniting the radical imagination and fueling social struggle. Specifically, it examines how *Adbusters* inspired the initial occupation of Wall Street and why, when they attempted to recreate their past success, they failed to catalyze a similar movement four years later. In the section that follows I will first address the issue of social reproduction and how it both mediates and is mediated by the normalization of social

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crises. Next, I turn my attention to the intersection between alternative media and their role in the circulation of struggles and in the development of radical imaginaries. I will then examine the case of the ‘Billion People March’ that was intended to revitalize our contemporary cycle of struggles but ended up generating only small crowds and very limited media attention. Finally, I will suggest that the lesson to be learnt from this recent failure is that a reinvigorated push towards social justice cannot depend solely on a mediated and individualized manner of protest but must recognize that the realization of alternatives depends on the physical organizing and experimentation carried out on the ground.

### **Social Reproduction and the Normalization of Crisis**

Social systems are characterized by a constant tension between systemic legitimacy and the demands of the citizenry. Social order broadly, and capitalism specifically, depends on the interest and consent of the broader population – insofar as our buy-in to the system is enough to deter us from revolt. If at any time, the social system neglects to provide the population with what it has come to expect, if it appears to stop working, it runs the risk of social upheaval to the degree of an overthrow because any system of social organization must be reproduced. In other words, when a system encounters turbulence it becomes exposed to crises of social reproduction (Wright, 2010). Such cracks in the social order often become more observable in times of crisis (Fuchs, 2014a; Fuchs, 2014b; Habermas, 1973).

In his early work on crisis in advanced capitalist societies, Jürgen Habermas (1973) lays out a social scientific conception of crises in which these structural incompatibilities contribute to systemic tensions. “Crises in social systems,” Habermas explains, “are not produced through accidental changes in the environment, but through structurally inherent system-imperatives that are incompatible and cannot be hierarchically integrated” (2010: 2). In liberal capitalist societies, these crises arise due to the separation of social integration and the market system. Habermas argues that in late capitalism the tensions between these two spheres reveal systemic inconsistencies to both the bourgeois and proletarian classes – in as much as we believe that these class distinctions are still appropriate.<sup>2</sup> For Habermas, a consciousness arises during periods of systemic crisis, which contributes to conflicts through which radical social change can

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<sup>2</sup> See Wright, E. O. (2015). *Understanding class*. London and New York: Verso.

be realized. In each moment of systemic tension, the potential for envisioning alternative modes of social organization and collective subjectivity exists. While legitimation crises are rare, our present moment is an era of crises.

In contemporary global society, however, we can observe a deficiency in Habermas' conception of systemic crisis. That is, the ideological apparatuses of the global age work to veil structural inconsistencies. Whereas in Habermas' view these inconsistencies foster crisis consciousness, the history of the past century demonstrates capitalism's ability to reappropriate antagonistic impulses and to flatten out critical thought and discourse (Marcuse, 1991)<sup>3</sup>. In other words, it is in the process of remedying these incompatibilities that capitalism expands and reproduces itself. Marx's predominant crisis of capitalism, we must now recognize, never came about – the system is such that it can adapt to movements and opposition through cooptation. Instead, in our era of crises they are often seen as isolated, and those that articulate themselves globally do not always result in mass upheaval, their imminence dismissed through the rationalization of the status quo. Che becomes a t-shirt, revolution an ad campaign.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Radical Imagination, Alternative Media, and Social Movements**

This process of cooptation coincides with the productive generation of new resistant subjectivities, especially in times of increasing social struggle. Indeed, many scholars have noted the resurgence of interest in radical theory in times of economic hardship (Fuchs, 2014a, Wright, 2010). This should, of course, come as no surprise. In times of crisis, the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism are brought into the light, creating the conditions for renewed questioning of the system. As Christian Fuchs (2014a: 12) explains:

“Due to the rising income gap between the rich and the poor, widespread precarious labour and the new global capitalist crisis, neoliberalism is no longer seen as common sense. The dark side of capitalism, with its rising levels of class conflict, is now recognized worldwide”.

This period of recognition is therefore a crucial strategic moment for anyone dedicated to

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<sup>3</sup> This understanding of the absorbent power of capitalist society is informed primarily by Marcuse (1991) and Horkheimer and Adorno (2002). Such considerations, do, however, often fall short of recognizing the resistant potential of working-class struggles and social movements (Cleaver, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> How often do we hear about revolutions of industry? Revolutionary new products, disruptive innovations, and anarchic management styles are common place in today's world.

egalitarian social change. The naturalized “truths” reinforced through the apparatuses of social reproduction are suddenly exposed to critique. Moreover, in these moments the entrenched belief that “there is no alternative” becomes questionable.

The importance of the unconscious belief in what is possible cannot be overstated. “As Wright (2010: 286) argues:

“Of the various aspects of ideology and belief formation that bear on the problem of social reproduction and potential challenges to structures of power and privilege, perhaps the most important are beliefs about *what is possible*.”

But beliefs about what is possible can change, and this change is a product of the imagination. The process of resistance begins when we dare to imagine alternatives – to borrow a term from Slavoj Žižek, when we choose to dream dangerously. In his essay on the 2011 global cycle of struggles, Žižek (2012) probes both their causes and effects. For Žižek, these instances of resistance were simultaneously a rejection of the status quo and the assertion of a new horizon of the possible. Occupy, in particular, presents a case study in the rejection of the structures of liberal democracy. Imagining an alternative to the neoliberal order, this reasoning goes, necessitates a *reimagining of social relations* and a rejection of the apparatuses of bourgeois political order. The protest, in this instance, is the laboratory where new forms of social organization can be tested, where imagination can be put into practice. And when the occupation ends and the protesters return home, these experiments go with them. Eventually, a new diaspora of movements begins to circulate, sharing the same incubator but making different contributions to the social landscape (Haiven, 2014).

So where does the initial radical impulse stem from? In a reality where creativity is being enclosed by the imperatives of cognitive capitalism, the imagination is increasingly informed by the instrumental logic of the market. In his recent collection of essays on the radical imagination, Canadian cultural theorist Max Haiven (2014: 245) tracks the development of this phenomenon and argues that “...capitalism has dissolved into society and social relationships themselves and seeks to shape the way people make community, networks, and even their own subjectivity.” Dire as this sounds, Haiven finds hope in the post-crisis circulation of struggles, seeing them not only as social laboratories, ala Žižek, but as sites of inspiration, as engines of creativity. They

awaken something within our collective imagination, a connection to the history of struggle – what Benjamin (1968) calls “the angel of the past.” “The common imagination” explains Haiven “is a reservoir of radical ideas and inspirations we share with the past and to which we contribute” (2014: 253). For Benjamin and Haiven alike, the cumulative power of past struggles serves as a reminder of our collective agency, one that has the potential to propel us into a new cycle of resistance and actualization. Put more simply, the protest, past or present, reminds us that we are not compelled to accept the reality presented to us; we, like our ancestors, have the right and the capacity to rebel.

### **Alternative media and social movements**

The catalyst for such a sudden emergence of awareness and subsequent action depends heavily on a medium of dissemination. As DeLuca and Peeples’ (2002) investigation of Seattle’s World Trade Organization protests illustrates, there is a complex relationship between broadcast media, new media technologies, and civil disobedience. In their study, DeLuca and Peeples isolate the broadcast media narrative of this event, highlighting the ways in which the dominant discourse and the activists’ use of these platforms conflicted. What is underplayed – though acknowledged – in their account is the central importance of alternative news sources and online communities like IndyMedia in the lead up to, and organization of, the Seattle protests. Alternative media are therefore often central to the realization of radical strategy.

Christian Fuchs (2010) conceives of alternative media as a subaltern public sphere, placing the critical lens at its foundation. These media should “...challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media production, media structures, content, distribution, and reception” (Fuchs, 2010, 178). Fuchs is particularly interested in examples that offer alternatives to the repressive messages of the mainstream media, that give voices to the voiceless and productive power to the powerless. However, these alone can not guarantee that physical resistance will materialize. For alternative media to be effective, they must, as Sandoval and Fuchs (2009) argue, exist within a network of individuals, organizations, cooperatives, and social movements pursuing a similar cause. There is also evidence to suggest that the reverse is true. Joshua Atkinson (2008), for instance, has demonstrated that change agents reporting higher levels of interaction with alternative media also report higher degrees of closeness with their social movement networks. Along the same lines,

John Downing (2008) sees media technologies as having the potential to mobilize audiences, while simultaneously expressing doubts over the emancipatory potential of online activism. Activism – and not necessarily content - for Downing, is the key ingredient for effective alternative media networks.

However, as Atkinson (2008) argues in his analysis of the relationship between social movements and their related media channels, content is important in establishing activist network interactivity on a global level, but less so in intimately organized local contexts. Instead, as he and his colleague Laura Cooley discovered later (Atkinson & Cooley 2010), the interactivity between social movements and alternative media takes place on content and action levels simultaneously. Thus, as 'narrative capacity' increases, so too do levels of closeness and interaction within the activist network. Narrative capacity, according to Atkinson and Cooley, is the efficiency of message dissemination through an activist network -in essence, an activist networks ability to tell its own story to its members. The performance of resistance, Atkinson and Cooley show, depends heavily on an activist's perceived 'closeness' with the network, this 'closeness' being established through the circulation of common narratives. Although Cooley and Atkinson do not delve deeply into the physical actions that they term "resistance performance" what their results reveal is the co-constitutional relationship between social movement narratives as disseminated through alternative media and the scope of activist involvement in the related movement. In effect, in this relationship we can observe the collective creation of actions and perceptions – the radical imagination

### **Adbusters, Occupy, and the Billion People March**

This relationship between perception and action, as mediated by alternative media, is illustrated by the case of *Adbusters*, a Vancouver-based counter-cultural magazine and website dedicated to the disruption of consumer society (Nomai, 2011). *Adbusters* is widely known for its own brand of cultural resistance, culture jamming: the reappropriation of consumer imagery for resistant purposes, inspired by the dissident actions of the Situationists in the late 1960s. Essentially, the magazine critiques consumer society while simultaneously packaging individualized radical politics as a lifestyle – what Max Haiven (2007) calls "privatized resistance" and what Thomas Frank (1997) calls "commodified dissent." While, *Adbusters* recognizes the fragmented quality

of subjectivity in the age of austerity,<sup>5</sup> one can question whether resistance on an individualized level is an appropriate response to this condition.

Occupy, according to Jodi Dean (2013), was set in motion through an anarchic mobilization of multiple movements at once – meeting people where they were. This was not privatized resistance but rather a common movement made up of disparate parts:

“Occupy made dispersed struggles register as a common struggle. To this extent, as it became a common name, it started to operate as a nascent party, one in the process of being formed and directed by people in the course of political movement” (Dean, 2013: 13).

It was, in this reading and as I propose here, a movement shaped by the physical organizing on the ground and not through the call to arms that may have sparked it. And Micah White (2016), former *Adbusters* editor and the co-creator of the Occupy call, is also quick to note that the power of the #OccupyWallStreet meme and its subsequent rallying call that “we are the 1%” was its openness and its flexibility for being repurposed by a number of movements with varying goals.

This particular style of movement organization reflects Haiven’s conceptualization of the radical imagination as not an individual attribute – something that one possesses – but as a collective process – something developed through lived practice. The radical imagination, for Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) derives from autonomous experimentation in social movements and activist communities. This is largely observable in the case of Occupy and especially in the imaginative forms of community organization exemplified by free libraries, artistic collectives, and community kitchens. Thus, the story of Occupy is not the story of alternative media, it is not the story of *Adbusters*. On the contrary, it is the story of collective imagining and of autonomous organization. It is the story of community and experimentation. *Adbusters* did provide a catalyst, an idea to mobilize around, but the work of the imagination was done physically and collectively in the streets and the squares. As Micah White (2016) explains, the “constructive failure” of Occupy was that it taught activists to create the future today, through revolutionary practice at the same time as it presented the limits to such a spatial-temporal tactical horizon.

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<sup>5</sup> See the *Adbusters* publication *Meme Wars: The Creative Destruction of Neoclassical Economics* for an accessible yet nuanced interpretation of the neoliberal condition (Lasn, 2012).

In 2015, *Adbusters* attempted to reprise its leading role in the theatre of protest. Late that spring, *Adbusters* put out a new call, a call for a ‘Billion People March’ to take place on December 19.<sup>6</sup> “Maybe marching in the streets isn’t for you,” one of the messages reads, “You like prowling alone, or with a few close friends... But you can be one in a billion too” (*Adbusters*, 2016). This call, be *one* in a billion attempted to recreate the phenomenon of Occupy– be an individual in a larger movement, or in a collectivity of individuals – part of the swarm as *Adbusters* once put it. Billed as a decentralized mobilization on a global scale, the calls for the ‘Billion People March’ proposed a “global big-bang moment” (*Adbusters*, 2015). What interests me here is how or if this individualistic, lifestyle-ist brand of resistance actually contributes to the collective process that we are calling the radical imagination. Does such a politics of the self and of the (anti) consumer actually promote instances and moments of solidarity or does it appeal to an atomized impulsivity, a yearning to rage against the machine as a “lone wolf,” ultimately, to a superficial insurgent impulse, that brand of commodified dissent one might expect from the dispersed denizens of our age of austerity?

To begin to answer these questions let us consider what actually happened on December 19, 2015, the proposed date of the ‘Billion People March’. According to *Adbusters* (2016), “On #D19 forty grassroots groups around the world took to the streets in dozens of cities on five continents to demand deep down, paradigm-shifting change to our global system.” This sounds promising but searches of Lexis Nexis, Google News and various individual news outlets produced no hits whatsoever for these terms in the days and weeks following the event: *Adbusters*, ‘Billion People March’, #d19, and #BillionPeopleMarch. Moreover, the same searches on Twitter and Facebook revealed a handful of small local actions. An individual here, a small group there, but there is little evidence that December 19 was much other than business as usual. As far as can be discerned, the turnout was rather short of a billion people. According to the limited social media chatter, demonstrations took place in Fort Wayne, IN, Savannah, GA, and Denver, CO. Photos reveal between eight and 15 participants at each event. It is, of course, possible and even likely that demonstrations also occurred elsewhere. That said, any impact they had is virtually invisible after the fact.

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<sup>6</sup> As a devote follower of *Adbusters* on both Twitter and Facebook, I welcomed this idea hoping that this time the movement might transcend some of the challenges of Occupy and catch on to an even greater degree.

In the ‘Billion People March’, we observe an attempt to recreate a past success,<sup>7</sup> Occupy, a movement that arose throughout communities around the world and engaged in a wave of struggle. Given the absence of evidence of action it is difficult to say why so few heeded the call. Perhaps it was the perceived lack of novelty. Perhaps it did not appropriately correspond with the movements of the moment – the messaging did not, for instance, seem to address the ongoing struggle for racial justice in the US and elsewhere best articulated by Black Lives Matter. Perhaps the cause was too vague coming so many years after the financial crisis of 2008 and Occupy.

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<sup>7</sup> Success in this context refers to the Occupy movement’s ability to mobilize an impressive and diverse number of activists under a single banner.

This seeming failure is, of course, no fault of the activists who demonstrated on December 19. After all, without the 300 or so demonstrators who initially occupied Zuccotti Park in 2011, Occupy would not have happened (White, 2016). In fact, Micah White (2016) recently reflected on a similar Adbusters initiated action, the Carnavalesque Rebellion, which was to take place in 2010. This action was doomed to failure much in the same way as the ‘Billion People March’ five years later. “The Carnavalesque Rebellion,” remembers White, “was a flop, and the protest fizzled... We failed because we were too early” (White, 2016: 13). The moment simply was not right in White’s view, and, to his recollection, the lesson he learned from the failure was that he and Lasn were ahead of the curve of contemporary protest. Again, in 2015, we might also assume that the moment just was not right — although in this case might we assume that the organizers were behind the curve? Is it really that much of a surprise that a reprisal of Occupy did not result in another mass insurrection? The multitude, following Hardt & Negri (2000), can and does reimagine history, the circuits of struggle translating one revolutionary moment into the next. But what is necessary for such a reimagining is the creative spark.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In an era characterized by continual crises there are noticeable tensions in the institutions of social reproduction and increasing opportunities for critique and resistance. In the preceding paragraphs I have explored the interrelation of alternative media and social movements by focusing specifically on the ways in which activist praxis prefigures the creation of alternatives to the status quo. The radical imagination, the common creation of new ways of seeing and of being, finds its inception in both communication and in practice. This said, we should acknowledge that there is no perfect formula for this resistant catalyst. What worked once in igniting the spark of the radical imagination might not work in a different time, a different place, or a different context.

What the case of *Adbusters* teaches us is that there are still moments in which the resistant impulse can manifest, instances that when seized hold the potential to radically alter both the world as it is and the world as we envision it. The autonomous community organizing of Occupy and the other manifestations it inspired – Occupy Oakland, Strike Debt, and the Rolling Jubilee to name a few – demonstrate that engaged communities working collectively toward a common

goal do, in fact, have the capacity to change the perception of what is possible. This will not happen in every instance, though. The ‘Billion People March’ is a stark reminder of this reality. New media technologies and alternative media messages alone do not, it seems, cause resistance movements. While they are a critical ingredient to the awakening of the radical imagination, they depend on social movements for their success.

I should stress that although *Adbusters*’ most recent call did not result in a global movement, that should not serve as an indictment of alternative media. As conditions worsen or stagnate for the majority of the world’s population, the unquestionable will continue to be questioned. Discontent will continue to drive many to read radical theory and consume alternative media (Fuchs, 2014a) and large numbers of people marginalized from the labour market “may thus begin to find ideologies and movements that challenge capitalism more credible” (Wright 2010: 287). Alternative media will continue to play a crucial role as a megaphone for the on-the-ground organizing that proliferates during these periods of increased critical curiosity and political tension. But rather than assuming that they can create new movements on their own, we should instead try to identify ways to support them as sites for consciousness raising, community building, strategic planning and unpredictable sparks of the radical imagination. For it only takes one idea brought into being at the right moment by a social movement to alter our perceptions of what is possible.

Recognizing this, we need a reinvigorated push to unify alternative media and activist communities. Of course, this must be a coordinated effort from both, but what this exploration of the communicative aspects of contemporary movements suggests is that alternative media must be reflexive and respond to the demands and programs of the movements of the moment. Putting out a meme is not going to be good enough in most contexts and what alternative media should strive for is interactivity with social movements locally and globally. Through direct involvement with movements and activists, alternative media can serve as both the spreaders of narratives and the platforms on which strategies and identities can be developed. What is needed is a coalition of alternative media and the movements they serve.

In case there was any doubt, the time to build a such a coalition is now. The last year has

revealed a surge in far-right organizing<sup>8</sup>, and from Brexit to Trump, this uptick in regressive political activity signals a dramatic shift in the global political landscape. For many, hope is likely to be in short supply, but it remains alive in the vibrant movements that have formed in resistance to this hard right turn. The treatment of these struggles in alternative media will be a crucial ingredient in influencing the ways in which they are perceived both internally and externally. In coalition, activists and media can create a united front from which to challenge regressive systems and policies while simultaneously prefiguring the forms and institutions that might replace them.

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<sup>8</sup> It's worth noting that this surge corresponds with new levels of regressive media production and consumption.

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