Occupy Oakland is dead. Long live the Oakland Commune.

An overview on the rise and decline of Occupy Oakland.

For those of us in Oakland, “Occupy Wall Street” was always a strange fit. While much of the country sat eerily quiet in the years before the Hot Fall of 2011, a unique rebelliousness that regularly erupted in militant antagonisms with the police was already taking root in the streets of the Bay. From numerous anti-police riots triggered by the execution of Oscar Grant on New Year’s Day 2009, to the wave of anti-austerity student occupations in late 2009 and early 2010, to the native protest encampment at Glen Cove in 2011, to the sequence of Anonymous BART disruptions in the month before Occupy Wall Street kicked off, our greater metropolitan area re-emerged in recent years as a primary hub of struggle in this country. The intersection at 14th and Broadway in downtown Oakland was, more often than not, “ground zero” for these conflicts.

If we had chosen to follow the specific trajectory prescribed by Adbusters and the Zucotti-based organizers of Occupy Wall Street, we would have staked out our local Occupy camp somewhere in the heart of the capitol of West Coast capital, as a beachhead in the enemy territory of San Francisco’s financial district. Some did this early on, following in the footsteps of the growing list of other encampments scattered across the country like a colorful but confused archipelago of anti-financial indignation. According to this logic, it would make no sense for the epicenter of the movement to emerge in a medium sized, proletarian city on the other side of the bay.

We intentionally chose a different path based on a longer trajectory and rooted in a set of shared experiences that emerged directly from recent struggles. Vague populist slogans about the 99%, savvy use of social networking, shady figures running around in Guy Fawkes masks, none of this played any kind of significant role in bringing us to the forefront of the Occupy movement. In the rebel town of Oakland, we built a camp that was not so much the emergence of a new social movement, but the unprecedented convergence of preexisting local movements and antagonistic tendencies all looking for a fight with capital and the state while learning to take care of each other and our city in the most radical ways possible.
This is what we began to call The Oakland Commune; that dense network of new found affinity and rebelliousness that sliced through seemingly impenetrable social barriers like never before. Our “war machine and our care machine” as one comrade put it. No cops, no politicians, plenty of “autonomous actions”; the Commune materialized for one month in liberated Oscar Grant Plaza at the corner of 14th & Broadway. Here we fed each other, lived together and began to learn how to actually care for one another while launching unmediated assaults on our enemies: local government, the downtown business elite and transnational capital. These attacks culminated with the General Strike of November 2 and subsequent West Coast Port Blockade.

In their repeated attacks on Occupy Oakland, the local decolonize tendency is in some ways correct. Occupy Wall Street and the movement of the 99% become very problematic when applied to a city such as Oakland and reek of white liberal politics imposed from afar on a diverse population already living under brutal police occupation. What our decolonizing comrades fail to grasp (intentionally or not) is that the rebellion which unfolded in front of City Hall in Oscar Grant Plaza does not trace its roots back to September 17, 2011 when thousands of 99%ers marched through Wall Street and set up camp in Lower Manhattan. The Oakland Commune was born much earlier on January 7, 2009 when those youngsters climbed on top of an OPD cruiser and started kicking in the windshield to the cheers of the crowd. Thus the name of the Commune’s temporarily reclaimed space where anti-capitalist processes of decolonization were unleashed: Oscar Grant Plaza.

Why then did it take nearly three years for the Commune to finally come out into the open and begin to unveil its true potential? Maybe it needed time to grow quietly, celebrating the small victories and nursing itself back to health after bitter defeats such as the depressing end of the student movement on March 4, 2010. Or maybe it needed to see its own reflection in Tahrir, Plaza del Sol and Syntagma before having the confidence to brazenly declare war on the entire capitalist order. One thing is for sure. Regardless of Occupy Wall Street’s shortcomings and the reformist tendencies that latched on to the movement of the 99%, the fact that some kind of open revolt was rapidly spreading like a virus across the rest of the country is what gave us the political space in Oakland to realize our rebel dreams. This point cannot be overemphasized. We are strongest when we are not alone. We will be isolated and crushed if Oakland is contained as some militant outlier while the rest of the country sits quiet and our comrades in other cities are content consuming riot porn emerging from our streets while cheering us on and occasionally coming to visit, hoping to get their small piece of the action.
For a whole generation of young people in this country, these past six months have been the first taste of what it means to struggle as part of a multiplying and complex social movement that continually expands the realm of possibilities and pushes participants through radicalization processes that normally take years. The closest recent equivalent is probably the first (and most vibrant) wave of North American anti-globalization mobilizations from late 1999 through the first half of 2001. This movement also brought a wide range of tendencies together under a reformist banner of “Fair Trade” & “Global Justice” while simultaneously pointing towards a systemic critique of global capitalism and a militant street politics of disruption.

The similarities end there and this break with the past is what Occupy got right. Looking back over those heady days at the turn of the millennia (or the waves of summit hopping that followed), the moments of actually living in struggle and experiencing rupture in front of one’s eyes were few and far between. They usually unfolded during a mass mobilization in the middle of one “National Security Event” or another in some city on the other side of the country (or world!). The affinities developed during that time were invaluable, but cannot compare to the seeds of resistance that were sown simultaneously in hundreds of urban areas this past Fall.

It makes no sense to overly fetishize the tactic of occupations, no more than it does to limiting resistance exclusively to blockades or clandestine attacks. Yet the widespread emergence of public occupations qualitatively changed what it means to resist. For contemporary American social movements, it is something new to liberate space that is normally policed to keep the city functioning smoothly as a wealth generating machine and transform it into a node of struggle and rebellion. To do this day after day, rooted in the the city where you live and strengthening connections with neighbors and comrades, is a first taste of what it truly means to have a life worth living. For those few months in the fall, American cities took on new geographies of the movement’s making and rebels began to sketch out maps of coming insurrections and revolts.

This was the climate that the Oakland Commune blossomed within. In those places and moments where Occupy Wall Street embodied these characteristics as opposed to the reformist tendencies of the 99%’s nonviolent campaign to fix capitalism, the movement itself
was a beautiful thing. Little communes came to life in cities and towns near and far. Those days have now passed but the consequences of millions having felt that solidarity, power and freedom will have long lasting and extreme consequences.

We shouldn’t be surprised that the movement is now decomposing and that we are now, more or less, alone, passing that empty park or plaza on the way to work (or looking for work) which seemed only yesterday so loud and colorful and full of possibilities.

All of the large social movements in this country following the anti-globalization period have heated up quickly, bringing in millions before being crushed or co-opted equally as quickly. The anti-war movement brought millions out in mass marches in the months before bombs began falling over Baghdad but was quickly co-opted into an “Anybody but Bush” campaign just in time for the 2004 election cycle. The immigrant rights movement exploded during the spring of 2006, successfully stopping the repressive and racist HR4437 legislation by organizing the largest protest in US history (and arguably the closest thing we have ever seen to a nation-wide general strike) on May 1 of that year 2. The movement was quickly scared off the streets by a brutal wave of ICE raids and deportations that continue to this day. Closer to home, the anti-austerity movement that swept through California campuses in late 2009 escalated rapidly during the fall through combative building occupations across the state. But by March 4, 2010, the movement had been successfully split apart by repressing the militant tendencies and trapping the more moderate ones in an impotent campaign to lobby elected officials in Sacramento. Such is the rapid cycle of mobilization and decomposition for social movements in late capitalist America.

THE DECOMPOSITION

So what then killed Occupy? The 99%ers and reactionary liberals will quickly point to those of us in Oakland and our counterparts in other cites who wave the black flag as having alienated the masses with our “Black Bloc Tactics” and extremist views on the police and the economy. Many militants will just as quickly blame the sinister forces of co-optation, whether they be the trade union bureaucrats, the 99% Spring nonviolence training seminars or
the array of pacifying social justice non-profits. Both of these positions fundamentally miss the underlying dynamic that has been the determining factor in the outcome thus far: all of the camps were evicted by the cops. Every single one.

All of those liberated spaces where rebellious relationships, ideas and actions could proliferate were bulldozed like so many shanty towns across the world that stand in the way of airports, highways and Olympic arenas. The sad reality is that we are not getting those camps back. Not after power saw the contagious militancy spreading from Oakland and other points of conflict on the Occupy map and realized what a threat all those tents and cardboard signs and discussions late into the night could potentially become.

No matter how different Occupy Oakland was from the rest of Occupy Wall Street, its life and death were intimately connected with the health of the broader movement. Once the camps were evicted, the other major defining feature of Occupy, the general assemblies, were left without an anchor and have since floated into irrelevance as hollow decision making bodies that represent no one and are more concerned with their own reproduction than anything else. There have been a wide range of attempts here in Oakland at illuminating a path forward into the next phase of the movement. These include foreclosure defense, the port blockades, linking up with rank and file labor to fight bosses in a variety of sectors, clandestine squatting and even neighborhood BBQs. All of these are interesting directions and have potential. Yet without being connected to the vortex of a communal occupation, they become isolated activist campaigns. None of them can replace the essential role of weaving together a rebel social fabric of affinity and camaraderie that only the camps have been able to play thus far.

May 1 confirmed the end of the national Occupy Wall Street movement because it was the best opportunity the movement had to reestablish the occupations, and yet it couldn’t. Nowhere was this more clear than in Oakland as the sun set after a day of marches, pickets and clashes. Rumors had been circulating for weeks that tents would start going up and the camp would reemerge in the evening of that long day. The hundreds of riot police backed by armored personnel carriers and SWAT teams carrying assault rifles made no secret of their intention to sweep the plaza clear after all the “good protesters” scurried home, making any reoccupation physically impossible. It was the same on January 28 when plans for a large public building occupation were shattered in a shower of flash bang grenades and 400 arrests, just as it was on March 17 in Zucotti Park when dreams of a new Wall Street camp were clubbed and pepper sprayed to death by the NYPD. Any hopes of a spring offensive leading to a new round of space reclamations and liberated zones has come and gone. And with that, Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Oakland are now dead.
If one had already come to terms with Occupy’s passing, May 1 could actually be viewed as an impressive success. No other 24 hour period in recent memory has unleashed such a diverse array of militancy in cities across the country. From the all day street fighting in Oakland, to the shield bloc in L.A., to the courageous attempt at a Wildcat March in New York, to the surprise attack on the Mission police station in San Francisco, to the anti-capitalist march in New Orleans, to the spectacular trashing of Seattle banks and corporate chains by black flag wielding comrades, the large crowds which took to the streets on May 1 were no longer afraid of militant confrontations with police and seemed relatively comfortable with property destruction. This is an important turning point which suggests that the tone and tactics of the next sequence will be quite different from those of last fall.

Yet the consistent rhythm and resonance of resistance that the camps made possible has not returned. We are once again wading through a depressing sea of everyday normality waiting for the next spectacular day of action to come and go in much the same way as comrades did a decade ago in the anti-globalization movement or the anti-war movement. In the Bay Area, the call to strike was picked up by nurses and ferry workers who picketed their respective workplaces on May 1 along with the longshoremen who walked off the job for the day. This display of solidarity is impressive considering the overall lack of momentum in the movement right now. Still, it was not enough of an interruption in capital’s daily flows to escalate out of a day of action and into a general strike like we saw on November 2.

And thus we continue on through this quieter period of uncertainty. We still occasionally catch glimpses of the Commune in those special moments when friends and comrades successfully break the rules and start self organizing to take care of one another while
simultaneously launching attacks against those who profit from mass immiseration. We saw this off and on during the actions of May 1, or in the two occupations of the building at 888 Turk Street in San Francisco or most recently on the occupied farmland that was temporarily liberated from the University of California before being evicted by UCPD riot police a few days ago. But with the inertia of the Fall camps nearly depleted, the fierce but delicate life of our Commune relies more and more on the vibrancy of the rebel social relationships which have always been its foundation.

The task ahead of us in Oakland and beyond is to search out and nurture new means of finding each other. We are quickly reaching the point where the dead weight of Occupy threatens to drag down the Commune into the dust bin of history. We need to breathe new life into our network of rebellious relationships that does not rely on the Occupy Oakland general assembly or the array of movement protagonists who have emerged to represent the struggle. This is by no means an argument against assemblies or for a retreat back into the small countercultural ghettos that keep us isolated and irrelevant. On the contrary, we need more public assemblies that take different forms and experiment with themes, styles of decision making (or lack there of) and levels of affinity. We need new ways to reclaim space and regularize a contagious rebel spirit rooted in our specific urban contexts while breaking a losing cycle of attempted occupations followed by state repression that the movement has now fallen into. Most of all, we need desperately to stay connected with comrades old and new and not let these relationships completely decompose. This will determine the health of the Commune and ultimately its ability to effectively wage war on our enemies in the struggles to come.

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1. The decolonize tendency emerged in Oakland and elsewhere as a people of color and indigenous led initiative within the Occupy movement to confront the deep colonialist roots of contemporary oppression and exploitation. Decolonize Oakland publicly split with Occupy on December 5, 2011 after failing to pass a proposal in the Occupy Oakland general assembly to change the name of the local movement to Decolonize Oakland. For more information on this split see the ‘Escalating Identity’ pamphlet: [http://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com/](http://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com/).

2. The demonstrations on May 1, 2006, called El Gran Paro Estadounidense or The Great American Boycott, were the climax of a nationwide series of mobilizations that had begun two months earlier with large marches in Chicago and Los Angeles as well as spontaneous high school walkouts in California and beyond. Millions took to the streets across the country that May 1, with an estimated two million marching in Los Angeles alone. Entire business districts in immigrant neighborhoods or where immigrants made up the majority of workers shut down for the day in what some called “A Day Without an Immigrant”.