

# How Occupy activists fell in love with their own radical horizontalism and fetishized physical occupation

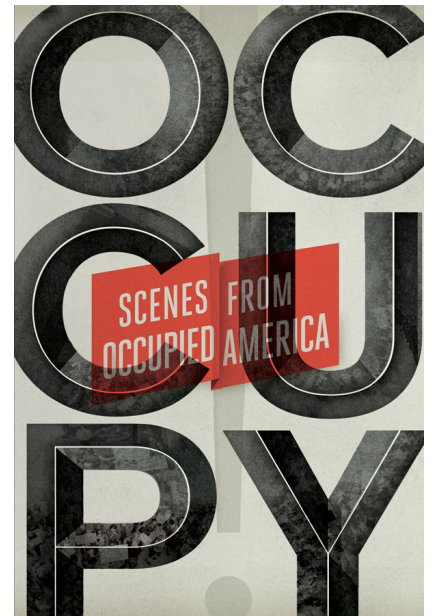
*In the fall of 2011, a small protest camp in downtown Manhattan exploded into a global uprising, sparked in part by what many saw as the violent overreactions of the police. **Occupy!** is an unofficial record of the movement and combines first-hand accounts with reflections from activist academics and writers. **Jason Hickel** finds the book has excellent moments of insight but thought it could benefit from a more lengthy analysis.*



**Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America.** Astra Taylor and Keith Gessen (eds). Verso. 2011.

## Find this book

When a small group of activists first occupied Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan last September nobody thought it would amount to much. But it wasn't long before Occupy Wall Street struck a chord with a nation embittered by bank bailouts, plutocracy, and rising social inequalities, galvanized hundreds of thousands of angry protestors, and inspired similar encampments in dozens of cities across the United States and Europe. As a scholar who followed OWS closely with both personal and scholarly interest, I was thrilled to get my hands on *Occupy!: Scenes from Occupied America*, one of the first book-length texts to have been published on the topic.



*Occupy!* was composed in an unconventional style. It compiles 34 short chapters and dozens of sketches and photographs selected and edited by a team of eight scholar-activists, mostly from radical journals in New York such as *n+1* and *Dissent*, led by Astra Taylor and Keith Gessen. Some of the chapters are first-person diary entries – most of them authored by the editors themselves – that report observations from occupations across the United States (in New York, Oakland, Boston, Atlanta, and so on) and supply ethnographic perspectives on the movement. Others are reprints of viral blog posts or speeches and essays addressed to OWS by prominent figures on the Left, including Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, Jodi Dean and Angela Davis.

Readers unfamiliar with the basic contours of the Occupy movement will appreciate the insider

insights that the book offers. Written in an accessible blog-style format, the diary entries capture the vitality and excitement of the movement while more substantive chapters supply key points of analysis. Alex Vitale, for example, contextualizes state violence against Occupy with an overview of changing policing tactics since the 1990s. But for anyone who followed the movement in the news media and blogs while it was unfolding, there's not much new here. The pieces by Zizek and others were widely circulated online during the occupations, and the chapters about high-profile Occupy actions – such as Occupy the Boardroom, Stop Stop-and-Frisk, and the “We are the 99%” tumblr – will be familiar to anyone who followed OWS on Facebook or Twitter.

The book's timely nature is both its strength and its weakness. Verso managed to get it out before the end of 2011, mere months after the occupations began, giving the text a rare sense of immediacy and relevance. But because it was pushed out the door so quickly it is limited mostly to first-order description and lacks the theoretical depth that a longer temporal perspective would offer. The text was written before the police raided the Zuccotti camp and before Occupy lost the widespread public support it enjoyed in its first months, so it can't offer the post-mortem analysis that most readers will want and doesn't address the reasons for the movement's failure to front a serious challenge to the social lesions that inspired it. How did the biggest social movement in the US since the 1960s fail to parlay a moment of unprecedented political potential into substantive social change? Scholars hoping to find serious critical analysis will have to look elsewhere.

This is not to say that *Occupy* doesn't include moments of excellent insight. While the general thrust of the book is celebratory (not surprisingly, given that the editors are all seasoned activists), a few of the chapters offer subtle critiques of the movement. A contribution by L. A. Kaufman wrestles with the flaws inherent in the horizontal consensus-based decision making process that Occupy employed. Audrea Lim points to the movement's failure to create meaningful ties with immigrants and other working-class residents of New York. And Nikil Saval argues that Occupy missed a vital opportunity to forge solidarity with the labor movement. Unfortunately, however, none of these chapters are long enough to allow for serious intellectual work.

The book concludes with an intimate diary-style piece by Keith Gessen that captures what I take to be the core weakness of Occupy. He describes how OWS focused more energy on the mundane logistics of camp life than on organizing for social change. Petty decisions such as how to manage laundry (a multi-day debate), what kind of storage bins to buy (they had to be fair trade and procured through Craigslist), and how to put limits on the drumming circles without alienating them (some considered this a civil rights issue) often sucked up hours of valuable time when put to consensus-based discussion in General Assemblies.

In other words, Occupy activists fell in love with their own radical horizontalism (the “prefiguration” of a new society, as they put it) and fetishized physical occupation as a revolutionary tactic. In the process, they ignored generations of accumulated wisdom about how to mobilize successful social movements, even to the point of refusing to isolate and organize around specific demands.

As a result, the nation – and, most importantly, poor and working-class Americans – lost faith in Occupy’s ability to effect the change that people so desperately needed, and a moment of true revolutionary potential slipped through the fingers of history.

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