Inequality, Egalitarianism, and Occupy Atlanta

THESIS

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Abstract

This research seeks to answer whether knowledge of critical social science allows protesters in egalitarian, utopian movements to subvert the reproduction of inequality. Ethnographic research, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation, as well as artifact analysis, was conducted at the Occupy Wall Street protests in Atlanta during their tenure in Woodruff Park, from October 7th, 2011 to October 25th, 2011. Preliminary observations and interpretations were posted online for informants to read on a Wordpress blog. Data were analyzed with a qualitative, interpretive lens. This thesis argues that critical social science produces inequality rather than subverting it, and that it is necessary for anthropologists to shift the lens of analysis in order to support egalitarian action. This thesis argues that critical social science perspectives construct inequality in the present and construct a privileged role for social scientists as the sole analysts of inequality. Within the lens of critical social science, inequality will necessarily be reproduced and multiplied as a consequence of misrecognizing cultural capital. By contrast, this thesis argues for analyzing egalitarian social movements in terms of their practice of equality rather than their end goals. This thesis also argues for opening the fieldwork process and disseminating interpretations and observations to informants in order to produce a more equitable academic discourse.
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Chapter 1: Equality, the Urban Commons, and Occupy Atlanta

I conducted ethnography at Occupy Atlanta in October of 2011 to explore whether activists who have studied academic models of inequality could subvert the reproduction of inequality. In this thesis, I evaluate the role of critical social science in creating more just communities through egalitarian social movements. Protesters at Occupy Atlanta sought to change a culture of inequality by creating and practicing an egalitarian culture within it. The egalitarian utopian project has been at the heart of justice-based social movements for decades. The Civil Rights movement, the anti-World Trade Organization protests, and Occupy Wall Street, among many others, experimented with radical new power structures and decision-making processes intended to subvert the reproduction of inequality within their new social worlds (Polletta 2004). Egalitarian social movements are closely tied to academic thinking on inequality, from Gramsci’s ideal politician, who sees his place in history and can therefore act to change it, to Althusser’s party intellectual that can articulate and disseminate the needs of the working classes (Gramsci 1937[1972]; Deranty 2010). Participants in egalitarian movements are, in turn, aware of scholarly models of inequality, shape their social movements in response; indeed, activist scholars are staples of modern social justice movements. After all, Occupy Wall Street was initiated in part by anthropologist David Graeber, and invited such scholastic luminaries as Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Zizek, and Naomi Klein to speak to General
Assemblies. Therefore I examine whether and how critical scholarly understanding of inequality allows social movement participants to create egalitarian cultural models.

I have chosen to evaluate critical social science as a fiction. Fictions, per Jens Beckert, are narratives based not on empirical evidence but rather on the creators imaginings of the world (2013). Fictions are not “serious” in that the author of a fiction is not committed to the world that he or she imagines, but in imagining creates spaces of possibility to evaluate the unknown (Ibid.). Foucault argued that writing is an ethical practice in which we consider the possibility of other worlds (Gibson-Graham 2006). There is an ethical duty to evaluate the sort of other worlds we are imagining, especially in the context of economics: our economy is produced by discourse and practice (Ibid.). Fictions present future possibilities as though they were true, allowing us to construct the possible future actions of other agents (Beckert 2013). If a fiction is persuasive enough, it can shape the discourse and influence actions to make itself come true (Ibid.). In short, fictions are significant as the structure of discourse that shapes our social worlds.

In Giddens, human action is recursive and reflexive: we recreate our world by the ways we express ourselves, and we continually monitor change within our social world, which in turn shapes the manner in which we recreate it (Sibley 1995). The social power of the anthropologist lies in that reflexivity: in monitoring social life, the anthropologist produces a persuasive fiction that shapes the social world. The story of critical social science is one of many fictions that are available to evaluate inequality, egalitarianism, and social movements. It is a story in which inequality is reproduced and multiplied through the actions of capital, and in which that reproduction is made possible because
the operations of capital are disguised by actors’ misrecognition of their circumstances (Ross 1991). Because the story of critical social science is a broad and powerful one, I argue it is necessary to evaluate its role as a fiction that structures social life.

Many of my research participants at Occupy Atlanta could quote Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, and Bourdieu to me; I explored whether that knowledge helped them to create an egalitarian movement. I invited my research participants to a dialogue by opening the fieldwork process, publicly posting my observations and preliminary conclusions for discussion and critique. In doing so, I reevaluated the role of fieldworkers in relation to their research subjects. In this thesis, I argue that the story of critical social science fails as an egalitarian effort, and in fact reproduces inequality. With the expectation that actors will misrecognize their circumstances, the fiction of critical social science conceals marginalized peoples’ understanding and constructs the inequality it seeks to critique. Instead, I argue we must understand egalitarian social movements in terms of practice rather than end goals. Constructing equality as a goal to be reached in the future creates inequality in the present. Through ethnography of Occupy Atlanta, I argue we must seek evidence of the ways that equality, not inequality, is continually produced through discourse and practice.

Eviction

On the night of October 25th, 2011, spectators from the city of Atlanta came to watch the police clear Occupy Atlanta protesters from Woodruff Park. The occupation, always both protest and performance, had gathered a hefty crowd of spectators. The streets around Woodruff Park, normally deserted after six in the evening, thronged with
young, drunk residents making their way to or from bars, students from the nearby
Georgia State University campus, photographers there for the promise of interesting
pictures, homeless people who usually slept in the park, and many more.

If the mayor’s office had hoped for an audience, they had chosen an ideal night
for the eviction. For its brief tenure, Occupy Atlanta had struggled to maintain solidarity
through cold weather and dreary rain that sapped morale and drove street life away from
where people might see the protest. The night of October 25\textsuperscript{th}, however, was warm, dry,
and crisp.

The line between participant and observer in the park was fluid. While only a few
dozen demonstrators waited in the park to be arrested, many Occupy Atlanta protesters
more watched from the edges. Members of CopWatch, an informal organization that
purports to observe the police and hold them accountable at protests, moved in teams of
three, wearing bright orange shirts over sweaters. One would ask a police officer for his
or her name and badge number one would film the exchange, and a third filmed the
filming from a slight distance, in case anyone interfered.

CopWatchers had been implicated in the growing tensions between Occupiers and
Atlanta police. One organizer told me that CopWatchers created confrontational
situations with local police officers. The CopWatchers I interviewed insisted they only
acted in accordance with their legal rights. A second, less confrontational group, the
Legal Observers, were filming as well, dressed in neon green shirts with neon green hats.

Members of the local news media wandered through the park with cameras, their
vans parked at the northern perimeter. Normally, they would park in the quiet street along
the east edge. On the night of the eviction, though, the police blocked off the road at the east edge of the park with metal barricades and set up a table and chairs at the plaza across the street to serve as a small ad hoc processing center. The established news media were not alone. Many spectators, whether protesters or merely passerby, held cell phone cameras over their heads, taking video and pictures. Even the police were filming: designated men and women in police uniforms stood to the side taping police actions.

At the first rumored eviction on October 10th, only three days after the beginning of Occupy Atlanta, protesters had been grim and careful: in the General Assembly, protesters discussed who, if anyone, would be willing to be arrested. On the evening of October 25th, however, Occupiers played with dogs, sang along with guitars, and laughed as they made signs. The crowd of passerby that had gathered was boisterous, laughing, joking, and cat-calling the police. It might have been the addition of spectators; it might have been that, tested time and again, Occupiers had come to take the threat of eviction less seriously. It might have been that those who had feared arrest had become comfortable with the prospect.

Police had slowly telegraphed their intentions as they prepared for the eviction by erecting metal barricades around the park. For now, the entrances remained open, but extra barricades sat to the side of each entrance, ready to be moved into place. One Occupier, an ad hoc medic, told me he had spent the day cutting the zip ties holding the barriers together so that they would not impede others trying to escape, but each time he returned there were new zip ties in place. Two police helicopters circled over the park for most of that day and the day before. Occupy protesters had asked a man to leave that
afternoon. He had come to the park with a very large gun slung across his back, which he insisted was entirely legal, in order to make a point about First and Second Amendment rights. Occupiers were understandably nervous; he complied when asked to return without his gun.

Across the barricade, “Ryan,” a man I had met at the first General Assembly in Woodruff Park, told me that yes, they were certain the police would break up the protest, but that they had plans (which he could not reveal to me) for Occupiers’ response.

“Are you ready to see something incredible?” he asked. “You’re about to see a phoenix burn up and rise from the ashes.”

Ryan’s metaphor is particular to Atlanta. Atlanta’s mythos often references the burning of the city by the Union Army and its later rise to prominence as a phoenix rising from the ashes. There is a statue in Woodruff Park of a woman, nude to the waist, holding a phoenix aloft, making the metaphor a monument.

As the police began to enter the park, I heard spectators heckling them. One yelled, “Go five blocks south and you find crackhouses! Why aren’t you there?”

Despite the pervasive idea that each Occupy encampment was a local installment of a global movement, each revealed itself to have immediately local concerns and each was manifested in uniquely local ways. Occupy Cal concerned itself with issues of education and college tuition; Occupy Oakland derived its focus from perceived racialized violence committed by the police. Occupy Portland dealt directly with the mayor’s office; Occupy Denver elected a dog to represent them, when asked by the civic government. After being evicted from Woodruff Park, Occupy Atlanta protesters
encamped in a homeless shelter that was set to be shut down as well as foreclosed homes, both issues sensitive to a city with a high rate of homelessness and foreclosures.

Within a few days of beginning the Occupation of Woodruff Park, Occupy Atlanta protesters voted to rename it Troy Davis Park. Davis, a black man who was convicted of murder in 1991 and executed barely two weeks before Occupiers encamped in the park, was fresh on protesters’ minds. Progressives who had organized and been galvanized around the perceived racialized injustice of Davis’s execution threw themselves into Occupy Atlanta. On October 9th, two days after beginning the occupation, protesters held a candlelight vigil for Troy Davis’s birthday.

Opinions on the name change were mixed among those I interviewed. One man I spoke to, a homeless man who makes his money composing impromptu poetry for tourists, said that it was not enough; others argued that it shifted the focus away from the focus on global capital and economic injustice. Yet somehow, as the occupation went on, protesters focused on local political issues, the police, and the mayor.

Occupy protests must be understood in their individual local contexts, not in terms of the larger movement because to do so furthers the homogenizing nationalist agenda that these protests seek to circumvent. Occupy protesters were engaged in producing a new sort of urban commons as a space for dissent, and the nature of that commons is a set of relationships between the people in those individual urban areas (Harvey 2013). Seeing Occupy Atlanta simply as a local installment of Occupy Wall Street in Zucotti Park ultimately makes every instance of urban activism a reflection of a few prestigious urban centers. When Atlanta Occupiers marched, their most enthusiastic
chants were not about the economic system as a whole; instead, it was: “Whose streets? Our streets!” The endeavor of meaning-making emphasized local contexts and the right to the city over the national economic agenda.

Occupy Atlanta was a local urban movement. Its existence and methods applied by participants challenged models of citizenship, asserting the rights of marginalized people over the homogenized “public good.” A key component of modernist nationalism has been to subsume urban citizenship into citizenship as a member of the state (Holston and Appadurai 1996). In response to identity politics, the nationalist project attempts to make national citizenship an identity that takes precedence over all others, and subsumes local structures of privilege and hierarchy into a universal system of duties and rights (Ibid.). This is a project of creation: creation of a future, through planning based on a presumed public good that is focused on the national rather than the local (Holston 2012). Progressives have opposed the project of the planned public good in any number of forms, from early SNCC activists rejecting traditional bureaucracy on the grounds that it has not “served the cause of human freedom” to the Right to the City Alliance, founded in Atlanta, which demanded public attention on localized urban problems (Polletta 2004, Harvey 2013). In this light, it was entirely proper that Occupy Atlanta protesters kept their focus on one Georgia man they believed unjustly executed: their focus on Troy Davis placed within the context of the international Occupy movement demanded attention on individual marginalization over national agendas.

Occupation, as a tactic, involved claiming public space and repurposing it as a space for dissent (Harvey 2013). In claiming the right to the city through protest,
Occupiers reproduced a vision of a possible alternate world. Troy Davis Park was a site of urban insurgence, defined as a space that introduces “new identities and practices that disturb established histories” (Holston 2012). At Occupy Atlanta, protesters attempted to introduce radically egalitarian, democratic practice and the identity as an insurgent to Atlanta’s political discourse. Against urban planning, a utopian vision that attempts to produce a hypothetical stable future without opposition, utopian protesters defend an alternate cultural construction that is located in the site of opposition, and in creating spaces for opposition. Against the privatization of the urban landscape, urban protesters demand the right to keep the public space as a space for productive opposition (Holston 2012). Central to this is the idea of the city as a laboratory for people to produce the sort of culture that they want.

In Rebel Cities, David Harvey quoted sociologist Robert Park that cities are our most holistic attempts to remake the world according to our desires (Harvey 2013). Harvey argued, then, that in understanding the cities we try to make we produce the possibility of the culture we want, the people we hope to be, the relationships we value, the aesthetics we accept, and the ecological relationship we wish for (Ibid.). Urbanism is fundamentally a utopian endeavor. Utopianism has often existed within a context of authoritarian hierarchies: highly ordered utopian spaces are spaces concerned with the correction of deviance (Sibley 1995). Occupy Atlanta, by contrast, practiced a disorderly utopian space. Protesters sought to create an alternate model of the city: an insurgent one, in which chaotic and equal political discourse was the norm. In studying Occupy Atlanta, we must ask: what is the alternate city that protesters wanted to build? How would that
alternate city value opposition, and what sort of opposition would it create space for?
What is troubling about it? Most importantly, how must we re-evaluate the idea of
equality from journey to moment in order to continue the egalitarian project in our work?

In this thesis, I examine the quest for the egalitarian oppositional city within
Occupy Atlanta, taking particular notice of how and when that quest fails, and how and
when Occupiers sought to explore different forms of equality. In Chapter 2, I explain my
methods as an attempt to counter the inequalities produced by the research process by
opening fieldwork into an equal conversation with my informants. In Chapter 3, I
evaluate Occupy Atlanta’s egalitarian methods against social movement theorists’
conception of justice and Bourdieu’s reproduction of capital inequality. In Chapter 4, I
consider Occupy Atlanta’s rejection of Congressman John Lewis as an attempt to practice
a fiction in which equality is the assumption rather than a hypothetical end-point.

In doing so, I reject comparison to Occupy Wall Street in Zucotti Park and every
other instance of the Occupy Wall Street project. I argue that comparison is meaningless
to the counter-modernist urban insurgent project as it seeks to turn attention from the
national to the local. Instead, I consider Occupy Atlanta in terms of its own local urban
context, in terms of the political history of its city, and in terms of the harsh economic
realities of privileged and marginalized life in Atlanta.

After all, when Atlanta Occupiers marched against the police on the night of the
eviction, they were chanting, “Whose park? Troy’s park!”
Chapter 2: Opening the Fieldwork Process

At Occupy Atlanta, I experimented with opening the fieldwork process in order to create a more equal dialogue between researcher and researched. In his chapter on field-notes, H. Russell Bernard relates the anecdote of a student in his summer research program who, conducting research in an Idaho logging camp, nailed his transcribed fieldnotes to a pine tree each morning, along with a pen on a string so that informants could add corrections and commentary (Bernard 2006). The contemporary anthropologist has much better platforms available to share fieldnotes than a pine tree and pen, and can pursue more political ends in sharing fieldnotes. Writing is an ethical endeavor of creating the social world (Gibson-Graham 2006). In critiquing inequality, writing contains an implicit responsibility to mitigate inequality. I posted my fieldnotes, rewritten as a memorandum, to a blog that I then publicized to my informants, curious onlookers, and other social scientists. I used their responses to elicit further information and hold myself accountable to the community’s conception of itself. In much the same way that Occupy Atlanta protesters dramatized equality in their political processes, I used new media as the means to dramatize equality in the research process. Sharing my interpretations and observations in an accessible manner forced me to interrogate my relationship with my research participants, and gave them the power to enforce accountability.
At Occupy Atlanta, there were neither committee nor committee heads; specialized groups were ad hoc “working groups,” and the closest position to leader was the “bottom-liner,” the person accountable for the actions of their working group. On the sixth day of occupation, I met with a tall bearded man named “Lucian,” the “bottom-liner” for the Logistics working group. The Logistics working group handled the material realities of occupation: finances, sanitation, food, and the management of all donated resources. I was told that Logistics ran at a high rate of burnout. I knew that the previous bottom-liner quit after just a few days of occupation over the stress of her work, particularly carrying large sums of cash on her person through dangerous parts of the city late at night.

When I interviewed Lucian, he was understandably cagey with me: I had kept a daily blog of memoranda of my observations and interviews at Occupy Atlanta, which Lucian read and commented on. Recently, we had butted heads online. An organization I was involved with had a monthly fund-raiser, and Lucian asked the funds be donated to Occupy Atlanta. I had spoken against it. Finances at Occupy Atlanta, I argued, were of tenuous security. The last I had heard, Occupy Atlanta’s treasury was kept in a box carried on the Logistic bottom-liner’s physical person. The previous bottom-liner had been overwhelmed by the stress managing the physical finances, especially since she was readily identifiable from speeches at General Assembly. Lucian disagreed with me; not only that, Lucian wrote that people were “spreading misinformation” online about the state of Occupy Atlanta.
In that moment, I had to question my role at Occupy Atlanta. Early on, I made the decision to shift from active participant to observer. At planning meetings before the beginning of physical occupation, I participated in the Logistics working group, debating locations and resource availability. At the first Occupy Atlanta General Assembly, I spoke in favor of blocking Congressman John Lewis from speaking, an action I regretted soon after (a polarizing event at Occupy Atlanta discussed in detail in Chapter 4). In my notes, I wrote “no more active involvement for me – passive observation only”. Inevitably, I had to confront that passive observation was impossible, and that the process of research was active involvement in itself. While I might try to maintain my distance, the work I produced necessarily had an effect on the people it concerned.

It is a long-standing truism that fieldwork is “fraught” with problems of representation and symbolic power. Simply asking fieldworkers to evaluate their methods and positionality is inadequate; in doing so, we reproduce the relationships of power that define the social science field, keeping the locus of ethical awareness within the researcher rather than the researched. To make knowledge emancipatory, we must eliminate the hierarchy of explicator and explicated, and produce a model of ethnography that presupposes the research subject an equal place in discourse. The idea of the critical social scientist, identifying and examining social relations misrecognized by the laity, produces inequality by placing the scientist in the position of knowledge and research participants in ignorance (Pelletier 2009). Therefore, that trope must be eliminated: the social scientist must produce a dialogue of equality in the format of his or her academic discourse.
I argue that dramatizing equality is an essential addition to the field-noting and research process. Fieldnotes are our data and they are a means for us to work out the meaning of our data; rarely are they the means to eliciting further data. By publicizing my work before its completion, I opened a conversation for response and critique that could be integrated into the final result of my research, rather than addressing it after the fact. By exposing the fieldwork process, I presupposed that my informants could all be equal participants, interpreting Occupy Atlanta with equal authority.

*The Adversarial Anthropologist*

With each memorandum I posted, I asked participants at Occupy and other readers to correct anything they thought I had gotten wrong. One wrote, “I don’t think that any of this is necessarily inaccurate, just that it’s coming from an outsider’s perspective and not necessarily the most relevant to what is going on at the occupation … *Your bias is in your externality to this movement* [emphasis mine].” My informants were not shy to point out that I had tried to claim some sort of academic distance, and that doing so necessarily limited the ideas I had access to.

Despite marching, speaking in assemblies, and even chanting slogans, I held myself apart. I had come to the first Occupy Atlanta General Assembly as a participant. To my chagrin, I was directly involved in the controversial rejection of Congressman John Lewis (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). From that point, I decided to deliberately distance myself and act as an observer. In my fieldnotes and memoranda, Occupiers are almost always “they” rather than “we”. Hortense Powdermaker called this the heart of anthropology: involvement and detachment (Powdermaker 1966).
Anthropologists embed themselves in the community in order to access knowledge that an outside cannot, but maintain their distance to provide critical scrutiny. Since Edward Said’s “Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” anthropologists have struggled with the question of the Other. Said argued that anthropology is characterized by otherness: anthropology’s basis is in seeing the alien or the familiar through the alien (Said 1989). The image of the other has justified anthropology’s distance: we construct it as respect and non-interference, while carefully avoiding the discipline’s unpleasant history (Scheper-Hughes 1995). Thinking in terms of others, however, may be fundamentally unethical. Othering places the individuals we study outside the arena of ethical consideration, and therefore is only justified so long as it is part of a process of seeing the other as self (Pinsky 2003). While othering produces the ethical relativism that anthropologists prize by allowing individuals to live by different rules, that relativism also places individuals in a separate and ambiguously equal space of ethical consideration. The construction of the other must be temporary, and end in placing the other on equal footing with the anthropologist.

Troubling the concept of the other is not enough, because “troubling the other” only demands that the social scientist think about the place of the other rather than altering relationships of cultural power. Said recounts the story of an anthropologist at a conference who demanded that if Said destroyed the moment of othering in ethnography, he must at least provide a new interpretive moment (Said 1989). Nancy Scheper-Hughes answered the fraughtness of anthropology with a call for a “good enough” ethnography (Scheper-Hughes 1995). Indeed, her method is to join the other. In calling on us to
become “barefoot anthropologists” or *companheiras*, Scheper-Hughes demands we take the moment of othering to become the alien (Scheper-Hughes 1995). Participatory researchers demand we take the studied community’s goals to heart, placing activism before our own careers and projects (Pullido 2008). Each attempt to engage with the problem of the other directly is one of submerging ourselves, as anthropologists, more deeply in the other’s needs and the other’s world.

Our attempts to join the communities we study are problematized by the history of the discipline and by our status as cultural elites. We cannot understand anthropology outside of colonialism, and must recognize that those we study are defined historically by objectification in research (Said 1989). Unfortunately, despite individual commitment to participatory research, there is no guarantee of that commitment by social scientists as a whole. Further, when we publish on a community, we draw other social scientists’ attention to that community. The choices we make in representing ourselves are fundamentally political, and shape the role that social scientists as a whole play in our informants’ lives (Ibid.). The tropes of social science produce inequalities of power. To place ourselves in the role of explicator, we must first produce the idea that our informants cannot understand their lives without our critical eye (Citton 2010). As critical theorists, we construct a world of misrecognition, in which no one can understand the relations of power in their life without the distanced eye of the social scientist (Pelletier 2009). Having produced our informants’ ignorance, we make them vulnerable to symbolic violence.
The moment of tension in which we admit ignorance and request critique, when we recognize our adversarial relationship with our informants but attempt to give them power over us, can be the ethnographic moment that Said’s despairing anthropologist (above) asked for. With new media, we have access to new tropes and new ethnographic moments. Jacques Ranciere argues that the Internet “is a refutation of the certifying process” (2010). The nature of online discourse, he argues, refutes the idea that there is a right way to proceed from one piece of knowledge to another; in defiance of the pedagogical model, online discourse allows learners to follow their interests from link to link (Ibid.). If the nature of new media refutes the idea that there is a right way to gain knowledge, then it also refutes the authority of those who have gained knowledge in that way (Ibid.). As a trope, blogging is characterized by interaction with the audience (Nardi et al 2004). More importantly, blogging happens online, where “anyone can publish anything.” That open platform destroys the authority of the social scientist. In an academic publication, the worthiness of a social scientist’s opinion is presumably determined by their ability to pass by gatekeepers of knowledge. Online, it is determined by their ability to express it convincingly. Even the beginning Internet user must determine how to sort through and classify information according to trustworthiness and utility (Ranciere 2010). The anthropologist’s blog is subject to that same process: it is trusted, without academic bona fides or the imprimatur of authority, at the discretion of the audience. This is the ethnographic moment that Said asks for: the very act of putting our research online outside of academic institutions destroys the social scientist’s symbolic capital.
Before Occupy Atlanta encamped, Woodruff Park already had occupants. Early in the occupation, I interviewed a burly homeless man named “Carl” who performed spoken word poetry for passerby. I asked him what he thought of renaming the park after Troy Davis; he told me, “Mr. Woodruff left this park for the homeless.” I cannot confirm or deny Woodruff’s intention in founding Woodruff Park, but Carl’s statement remains a pervasive piece of lore among the vagrant population of Atlanta. Indeed, it was widely expected that Woodruff Park belonged to homeless people, at least after nightfall: when I interviewed police officers at the beginning of the occupation, they told me that all the occupation would do is force the homeless out of the park – and asked me, then, where would the homeless sleep?

My research priorities did not include the place of homeless people at Occupy Atlanta, in Atlanta at large, or in Woodruff Park. I determined I would focus on the rhetoric and actions of the protest; in my unexamined assumptions, homeless people were part of the existing geography of downtown Atlanta. While their presence might affect the operations of the protest, they were not themselves a significant part of Occupy Atlanta that required analysis and documentation.

Despite my oversight, homeless people regularly appeared in my fieldnotes and memoranda. Carl’s statement and the police officers’ opinion were only the beginning. At the first rumored eviction, I noted racialized commentary by two homeless men at the edges of the park. A self-appointed protest medic staffing the First Aid tent recounted how she provided care to what she described as a “crazy homeless woman” with an
injured leg. A homeless man demanded the floor at a meeting of the Demands working
group, ignoring protocol, to call for focus on homelessness issues. When I asked about
conflicts and confrontations at the protest, Occupiers mostly told me stories about
interactions with homeless people, including interceding between a homeless woman and
her abusive husband, and an Occupier who confronted a homeless man over “stealing”
food. Indeed, when the first rumored police eviction appeared to be too poorly attended
for protesters to hold the park, a key informant contacted the nearby homeless shelter to
send residents to help hold the park. I still did not think to focus my observations or
analysis on the role of homeless people in the protest. I had formed my research agenda;
it did not come to mind to change it. Then, responding to one of my memoranda in which
I mentioned a long altercation with Park Ambassadors, the city-employed custodians for
the park, over how to handle an injured homeless man, a reader pointed out the trend. He
said that homeless people seemed to keep cropping up in my writing, and told me that I
must focus on their role in the protest. At his prompting, the next day I did. I went to the
encampment intending to ask protesters specifically about homeless people and about
how Occupy Atlanta handled relations with already marginalized people.

I interviewed a young man who wore torn jeans and scuffed shoes. He looked to
me like any other teenaged punk. When asked about the homeless, he told me at length
what a problem they were. He told me that they stole things, used drugs, and started
fights. He told me that they expected to be fed without participating. I listened and took
notes, then asked where he lived (a question I asked everyone at the encampment). He
named a town several hours south of Atlanta.
I was impressed; I asked him whether he had driven up to the city just to be involved in the protest.

He told me no; he was at the hookah bar across the street, saw the encampment, and joined out of curiosity. He had been there a few days now.

The story did not quite make sense to me. I asked how long he had been in the city of Atlanta.

A while, he told me. A few weeks, a few months.

I asked where he slept the night before he came to the encampment.

Usually, he told me, he slept on MARTA trains (the Atlanta public transit system).

I asked if he was homeless. Instead of answering directly, he told me, “There are good homeless and bad homeless.” He went on to explain that distinction, and told me there were many homeless people directly involved in Occupy Atlanta. Interviewing him, I soon realized that most of the people policing the place of the homeless at the encampment were homeless themselves; other Occupiers were, for the most part, happy to feed and provide sanctuary in the park for homeless people. Only then, I pursued the question of homelessness and legitimized use of public space, as well as the ways in which marginalized people often reproduce the dynamics of their marginalization.

I was granted access to this arena of knowledge because my readers shifted my intellectual focus. When I first went to Occupy Atlanta, I intended to study the rhetoric at General Assemblies and working group meetings and analyze protesters’ evolving message. I was interested only in studying those who were directly involved in the
By studying the place of homeless people at Occupy Atlanta, I shifted my focus to understanding the ways protesters constructed the urban commons in dialogue with the city’s disenfranchised residents. The knowledge produced by those interviews and interactions was a result of an open collaborative research process, not my independent thought. Audience participation blurred the line between audience and anthropologist, and the added perspective demanded rigor and new research priorities, opening up new fields of problems and questions.

I included an invitation to participate in my blog posts and in descriptions whenever I linked to them. Usually I ended on some variant of “As always: corrections, critiques, and additions are welcome and encouraged.” I invited commentary and critique less directly by keeping the process of interpretation and observation open.

After the first rumored eviction, I asked:

So – in the nicest way possible – what the hell were the police doing?
Why did they line up such a substantial force if they did not intend to break up the protest?
Were they intimidated by the media? The decision to break it up last night came at a time when it was cold and rainy and sparsely populated and all but the ABC van were absent. Did their presence as the night cleared up discourage police action?


I kept my bias open to my informants and readers:
I will admit that I have delayed somewhat in writing more about Occupy Atlanta; I am ambivalent on the movement itself, and have debated whether I ought to try writing about it.


I made sure to describe my methods, including my failings:

Most of my account of the events leading up to last night’s arrests is based on hearsay and news reports; I’ll keep the information as brief as possible, without any of my own analysis or interpretation.

Blog post “Growing Tensions at Occupy Atlanta,” October 26, 2011

I have to forewarn you: I didn’t have a notebook, so to write this, I am relying on my own memory, a few notes I made on my phone, and a number of photos and videos I made on a friend’s iPhone.

Blog post “And the police cleared them out,” October 26, 2011

The new ethnographic moment required attacking the illusion of expertise, allowing informants and the laity the confidence to critique the social scientist based on their own understanding. Critical social science discourse often creates a relationship of intellectual inequality based on the social scientist’s expertise: by making the fieldworker the only one who can identify the “real” relations of power, it places everyone else in a position of ignorance (Pelletier 2009). The problem, then, is to find a way to talk about inequality and point it out without making one’s own knowledge the only way to recognize inequality (Ibid.). Ranciere attempts to solve this by only presenting ideas and
stories rather than explaining them (Ibid.). While this is a radically egalitarian idea, it eliminates the power of any observer to share their knowledge and understanding. Instead, Pelletier suggests we find a way to “dramatize equality in discourse”: to assume the intellectual capacity of our interlocutors as a given, and to make social science explication a conversation rather than a statement (Ibid.). My open field-noting process was an attempt to create a research dialogue.

In my work, I dramatized equality by deliberately attacking my own authority. I requested critique, received critique, responded to that critique, and altered my work in response. I opened the black box of fieldwork, keeping the nature of how I found my information and how I arrived at my conclusions accessible to my informants and to almost any readers. My readers, in turn, responded to the research conversation.

When I wrote:

On the east edge of the park, I am told the head of Parks and Recreation was handing out copies of the ordinance based on which they’d be expelled (can anyone confirm or deny this? Can anyone provide the ordinance?)


Two participants responded:

I got a one page ordinance- front and back- handed to me by the park & recs guy. He had at least 100 copies in his hand and his purpose there was to ensure that everyone was "aware" of the law- or rather aware that we were breaking by the law by staying. I feel like the city's park and recs
department was trying to save it's ass from being sued by occupiers who may have claimed they were not aware of the regulations. There were several vehicles parked around the park after the mass amounts police force left that for various reasons (wires, engines running with nobody in the car, etc) looked like undercover police cars.

Response to blog via Facebook, October 11, 2011

The head (I think) of parks & recreation did come to hand out copies of the ordinance, but he didn't seem to have many and I didn't actually see him handing any out. I saw maybe one or two copies from where I was. He did get quite a lot of press attention though. The crowd started chanting to drown him out though, so he and his media posse moved around the periphery for a while before he left.

Response to blog via Facebook, October 11, 2011

My informants not only responded to my questions, but added more information and interpretation. My blog acted as an elicitation device, allowing me to collect knowledge on a grander scale than I could have without sharing my questions and uncertainties. Often enough, it led me to more interviews. After the first rumored eviction, I speculated on the feelings of those participants who had been prepared to be arrested. One of them responded to my link in the Occupy Atlanta Facebook group, and invited me to interview him the next day at the encampment.

My interlocutors and audience were not shy about demanding accountability.

Wordle is a program that arranges text into an image according to word frequency: the
most used words are made larger, and less used words are made smaller. Over a year after my fieldwork at Occupy Atlanta, I posted two Wordles to Facebook: one of my jottings and one of the more formalized memoranda. In the former, the largest word was “homeless;” in the latter, it was “police,” and “homeless” had shrunken substantially. In response, one of my readers wrote, “Hey, look at that! The homeless disappeared from professional reports! Just like real life!” (Response via Facebook, March 28, 2013)

Drawing on Ranciere, Pelletier asks that we dramatize equality in discourse (Pelletier 2009). To do so, I argue we must promote accessibility by publicizing ideas widely, by expressing ideas in a way that is comprehensible to the laity, and by opening ourselves to critique. While these principles might be adapted to other media, I argue that the Internet provides us an ideal means to dramatize equality. The assumption of interaction, as well as the anti-hierarchical discourse in new media, takes the social scientist off the pedestal of authority and opens him or her to be a mutual conversant rather than an expert. Research participants becomes participants in more than name: they have the opportunity to directly engage in the fieldwork process.

At the first eviction attempt, I interviewed a homeless woman crouched in her tent, refusing to either leave the park or join the circle of protesters waiting to be arrested. When I told her I was observing Occupy Atlanta to write about it on my blog, she said:

“Oh, I’m a journalist too.” Then she took my notebook and wrote down the link to her blog. My informant assumed our mutual equality. Rather than seeing me as an outsider looking in, she interacted with me as a fellow analyst and observer.

*Performing Commitment*
On the sixth day of encampment, I set out to find and interview bottom-liners, the ad hoc leaders of working groups. I was accompanied by Communications student from Georgia State University, who had joined me to study protest rhetoric at the occupation. At the end of each interview, I asked each bottom-liner for their message and their wishlist: what did they hope for my readers to know and what did they want from people who could donate time or resources to Occupy Atlanta.

First I interviewed Tactical Unity (TU)’s bottom-liner, a stocky Latino man named “Herman” I had met at an early planning meeting. Tactical Unity was a working group assigned to mediate conflicts between protesters, police, and anyone else passing through the encampment. At early meetings, Herman served on Logistics, and volunteered his experience as a combat medic to Occupy Atlanta. As bottom-liner for TU, Herman bemoaned the white male image of the working group. He had donated a duffel bag of camouflage gear to distinguish members of TU; he worried that people unskilled at mediation had joined TU so they could wear a uniform. For his wishlist, he asked for radios and a Tactical Unity tent.

H. Russell Bernard warns anthropologists that would share their fieldnotes of the CNN Effect: informants might tell them things they hope to have anonymously broadcast to the community as a whole (2006). At Occupy Atlanta, I decided to take ownership of the CNN Effect. Rather than mediate the strategies by which informants might use me to their advantage, I allowed myself to be used, while using the community as the site of my research. I argue that explicitly and publicly allowing the community to use me was a public performance of my commitment to the community. I chose to make the tension
between the community using me and me using the community a productive tension to produce mutual trust.

After our interview, Herman directed me to the Occupy Atlanta headquarters at 60 Walton Street, a union-owned office that had been donated to the protesters’ use. He radioed ahead so that the TU members guarding the door would let my research partner (the Georgia State student mentioned above) and me into the office. Apologetically, Herman explained that bags and laptops had been stolen from 60 Walton, and now they had to keep much tighter control of the space. When we made it to 60 Walton, the TU member at the door radioed back and forth with Herman and then others inside before we were allowed in. At 60 Walton I interviewed “Sonia,” a petite woman who acted as bottom-liner for the Process working group. Process was charged with facilitating assemblies and managing the decision-making process.

Sonia called for an end to factionalism among occupiers. She told me that protesters who occupied overnight resented those that only came in the daytime, that men resented women’s influence, and that assemblies often degenerated into people yelling at each other over their duties. When I asked Sonia for her wishlist, she told me she needed more volunteers to keep track of “stack” (the list of people waiting to speak). Then, smiling wryly, she told me they needed “A sense of purpose.”

I was aware I was being used from the beginning: the initial purpose of my blog was to keep friends, family, and colleagues who no longer lived in the city abreast of what was happening politically on the streets of Atlanta. They used me as an information source for an event they were missing, but more importantly, they hoped I would give
them firsthand information to confirm their biases: either I would produce knowledge that showed Occupy protesters to be little more than privileged students yelling in parks, or that made them into effective revolutionaries. I avoided playing to either side by expressing my own misgivings and seeking a broad sample of Occupy Atlanta participants, as well as allowing protesters’ voices be heard in response to my blog posts.

The protesters at Occupy Atlanta used me implicitly. When major events happened, whether protest marches or police actions, Occupy protesters told me they used my blog as an opportunity to find out what had occurred over the course of the protest, rather than just the part that directly involved them. I exploited this: if I was useful as an information source, then my work would be read and would garner responses from my research participants. Being used goes both ways.

Lucian made sure to emphasize that Logistics had a solid handle on their finances. He conceded that the previous bottom-liner had quit over the stress of managing money; now, he assured me, the money was kept in a secure location at 60 Walton. Further, he told me that Logistics had access to the Troy Davis defense fund’s bank account to store their finances; as soon as they determined the details of that arrangement they would surely do so to keep finances secure. He made sure to emphasize the aid Occupy Atlanta had provided to the homeless population. Lucian told me that Occupy Atlanta fed, on average, over four hundred people a day, and estimated that a significant portion of that were homeless.

Lucian and I used each other. He used my platform to correct the idea that Occupy Atlanta mishandled its finances and to emphasize the services protesters
provided to homeless people. I used him for access to the information I most wanted: concrete details about how many protesters had taken up residence in the park, how they fed themselves, how they managed sanitation, and where their financial resources came from.

I allowed myself to be used. Openly allowing participants to use me as an anthropological voice is a public performance of my commitment to community needs. The production of serialized anthropological knowledge in a blog is research-as-performance. I made it a performance of my trustworthiness.

*Accountability by Force*

Lucian was not happy to see me when I interviewed him. Why would he be? For all he knew, I would take that day’s notes from Occupy Atlanta and write a piece against the protesters. For all he knew, my performance of commitment that day had been only that: performance. Yet he would consent to be interviewed because, first, he knew me and I knew him: we were friends. Second, I had demonstrated a willingness to speak as an expert to people who had the ability to provide material resources to the protest. Giving me an interview at least allowed him to set the record straight.

There is an essential dilemma of ethnography. When we collect data, we risk committing symbolic violence against our informants. While we might hope to mitigate it by acting in good conscience and with the highest ethical standards, the risk remains as long as we define what constitutes a misrepresentation ourselves. Further, once we publish our research we do so with the imprimatur of academic expertise. Our informants lack the power to critique our work on an equal footing. While theoretically every
interview is voluntary, in reality refusing an interview exposes our informants to symbolic violence. By refusing to speak they risk having other voices represented as the sum total of their community rather than a fraction.

Blogging my fieldnotes did not entirely mitigate that risk, but dramatizing equality was the first step toward reducing symbolic violence. In the present day my fieldnotes remain available to anyone who would care to look at them, complete with doubts, mistakes, and explicit discussion of my interpretive process. My ethnography does not come polished and perfect, but instead with a clear expression of how it was produced. This keeps it open to critique and to discussion. Those who would question my interpretations already have my doubts and questions to start from.

More importantly, my fieldnotes were open and available while they were being produced. “Member checks” are an established part of the interpretive ethnographic process (Sandelowski 1993). In a member check, the ethnographer shows preliminary interpretations and ideas to a select few key informants and requests feedback to determine whether the work accurately represents their world. Of course, the usefulness of a member check is limited: by checking only with key informants, the ethnographer only opens the fieldwork process to a few members of the community – most likely those with whom he or she has established rapport. The ethnographer has no obligation to correct interpretations based on feedback, and the informants have no power to ensure the ethnographer does so. If the ethnographer publishes an account that commits symbolic violence by mis-constructing informants’ lived experiences, it is often too late for his or her informants to address that misrepresentation directly.
I argue that blogging fieldnotes and publicizing them is a member check with teeth. My blog was open to anyone with Internet access; given that most Occupy Wall Street protesters, including those at Occupy Atlanta, got their information through Twitter and Facebook, it is reasonable to say that my blog was available to almost everyone involved in the protest (Gamson 2013). When I published my blog posts, I shared and over-shared: rather than confining my readership to a select set of informants I knew directly, I posted links to blog posts on the Occupy Atlanta Facebook page as well as sub-forums on reddit.com dedicated to Occupy Atlanta, Occupy Wall Street, and Atlanta in general. This ensured my readership would include not only Atlanta Occupiers but also Occupiers in other cities, Atlanta residents, and any curious onlookers. That level of exposure meant that my research flaws were exposed and magnified a well. If I posted an interpretation of the protest that participants disagreed with, they had the power to shut me out.

I sought, in my work, to verify my informants’ equality by giving them just as much power to do symbolic violence against me as I had to commit symbolic violence against them. No more placing the locus of ethical reasoning in the anthropologist. No more keeping the anthropologist accountable only to him or herself and the academic community. This is accountability by force. Instead of reproducing problematic relations of power and symbolic authority, an open research process seeks to give informants equal power to evaluate the researcher, and, if necessary, strike back.
Chapter 3: Whose streets? Who speaks?

Even after the fact, it is difficult to say how exactly the occupation of Woodruff Park began.

Occupy Atlanta organizers sent an announcement out over Twitter and Facebook, which then filtered its way further by word of mouth. We were told to come to Woodruff Park for the first General Assembly; to bring signs and musical instruments; we were not told that any immediate action would be taken.

The ground was damp but the sun was out, and around five in the afternoon people began to stream into the park, many having fought their way through Atlanta rush hour traffic. An older man groused that the movement excluded the less able by holding its assembly in a park without decent seating; a chair was found for him. People congregated in small knots, sometimes signs in hand. I cannot say how the General Assembly began, only that the protesters and spectators assembled themselves in a loose circle around three people who identified themselves as the moderator-facilitator team. Attendees sat on the ground or squatted on their haunches. The quorum did not hold constant: people continuously left as new ones arrived.

The moderator-facilitator team, holding a megaphone up above their heads, explained the People’s Mic: each speaker would begin by calling out “Mic check!” as a substitute for a sound system. Speaking in short phrases, their words were echoed out to
everyone within hearing range. They went over the decision-making process as carefully as possible. Majority rule could force the protest to take actions a minority objected to. In order to prevent coercion, Occupy Atlanta would use a consensus model: a single individual could block a motion that the entire assembly was in favor of, though the moderator-facilitator team cautioned a block ought to only be used if the proposed action would cause the blocker to leave the occupation. Here the older man who had asked for a chair earlier protested; as an old Marxist, he said, he was quite certain opposition would use the consensus process to disrupt political action. His objection was mostly ignored.

Speakers would be determined by an agenda formulated beforehand by the Process working group. Representatives from each working group would speak one by one, and then there would be space for other business at the end of the assembly. A speaker could give information and then, if they wished, make a proposal. The moderator might take a “temperature check” on the proposal: a straw poll in which participants signal approval or interest by holding up their hands and wiggling their fingers in the air. If the assembly seemed to support the proposal, it moved into clarifying questions, in which participants could ask the presenter to elaborate on particular points. After clarifying questions, the moderator-facilitator team would ask for consensus. If anyone wished to block the proposal, they would signal by holding up their hands with the thumbs and forefingers pressed together to make a triangle. Blocks could explain why they blocked; in response, presenters could amend their proposals and begin the process again, until a proposal either passed or was tabled.
If the Process seems confusing, imagine explaining it to a crowd of hundreds in an outdoor park surrounded by busy streets. Your words are relayed to the crowd like a giant game of Telephone, while your audience carries on its own many private conversations. As you explain the Process, some of the audience leaves, and new members arrive. Many are impatient to express their own opinion. Members of your audience have different levels of mastery of the English language, of parliamentary procedures, and hearing.

It is little wonder, then, and no reflection on the earnest intentions of Occupy Atlanta’s Process working group that the consensus process might have been lost on much of the audience. Nevertheless, we moved into the business part of the agenda. Congressman John Lewis, a recognized figure of the civil rights movement, asked to address the assembly. A minority of protesters blocked John Lewis from speaking (discussed further in Chapter 4). A number of participants seemed outraged, but mostly confused by the process: if nearly everyone wanted to hear Congressman Lewis speak, why was he turned away?

The bottom-liner for Demands spoke next, the same man who had spoken first to block John Lewis. Arguments and information were lost in his speech; periodically he shouted out slogans, and the assembly, trained already to echo the speaker for the People’s Mic, shouted them after him. I noted that the People’s Mic could be used to produce consent by getting participants to uncritically repeat the speaker’s words and that a politically savvy speaker could easily manipulate the People’s Mic to his or her advantage.
Then, the bottom-liner for Demands called for the occupation of Woodruff Park to begin immediately. His proposal had barely been relayed to the assembly before he began to shout, “Power to the people! Power to the people!” and the People’s Mic echoed his words. The moment was lost in a confusion of voices: some of the audience echoed his words; some of the audience began to argue amongst themselves; as both participant and observer, I could hardly tell what had happened. Those sitting near me were similarly confused. Reviewing my fieldnotes, I see that it took me quite some time even to figure out that he had proposed occupation.

In my notes I wondered if some anonymous organizers had planned this from the outset: gather us into the park for an assembly, and spring an occupation on us by surprise. The process was lost in the furor that resulted. A cluster formed around the moderator-facilitator team, and only the occasional fragment of the ensuing discussion was caught by the People’s Mic. When they presented the proposal for consensus, blocks were ignored: whether intentionally or accidentally, it was unclear. Protesters objected that most speakers had been white and male; they objected that minority representation was limited in the crowd and almost nonexistent among speakers. Some argued the assembly ought to wait for a permit from the city or the police force; others that it was ridiculous to do so. Eventually the moderator-facilitator team proposed a recess while protesters discussed the proposal amongst themselves.

It is easy to read some skullduggery or conspiracy in the sudden onset of occupation. I heard rumors later that a small group of students from Georgia State University had deliberately planned a surprise occupation. Indeed, Woodruff Park was
conveniently located a few blocks from GSU’s dormitories, and consequently near laundry facilities, bathrooms, and beds that students could use while they occupied. Furthermore, the onset of occupation coincided with the beginning of GSU’s fall break, a three-day weekend for students. The timing and location of Occupy Atlanta were certainly convenient for GSU students.

I remarked, later, that it was curious that a mass movement seemed to belong to a few influential individuals. On the other hand, what if it had been perfect? What if occupation had been proposed and explained? What if blocks had been taken into account and the proposal modified? What if the proposal had passed with the full consent of the General Assembly? It comes to a central question for egalitarian movements: can protesters, recognizing their own privilege and place, create equal representation and justice within their own created structures?

*Participatory Democracy: Prefiguring Equality*

Consensus-based decision-making is an attempt to address issues of equal representation and equality. Though not explicitly an anarchist movement, the Occupy Wall Street protests shared a lineage with radical groups largely fomented and nurtured by the World Trade Organization protests in 2000. David Graeber argues that anarchism (in contrast with communism and other utopian social philosophies) is about *practice*: anarchists experiment with living the idealized future they would like to see (Graeber 2004). This is part of a process that Graeber calls “engaged withdrawal”, a mass defection from established social structures in order to experiment with creating new forms of community (Graeber 2004). Alaine Touraine suggests social movements as “counter-
models” of the world: they are meant to represent what the world could be, in opposition to what it is (Touraine 1981). This means that they must, first, construct a meaning of the existing social world and, second, produce a conception of a world that addresses perceived problems. In fact, Touraine argues, social movements are not attempting to create an alternative world: they seek to defend a hypothesized alternate world by demonstrating that it is possible, and that there are people committed to its creation (Ibid.). In traditional movements (defined as those in which participants organize to address a specific set of economic or political grievances), participatory democracy may be an attempt to experiment with new ways to run an organization in anticipation of the day when their members will be in positions of political power (Polletta 2004). Many activists I spoke to at Occupy Atlanta expressed ideas similar to Touraine’s: one insisted that Occupy Atlanta was most significant as “an existential break” with the status quo. Occupy Atlanta protesters were in the process of deliberately constructing new cultural models for political discourse and equality. The chant “Show me what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!” suggests a desire to exhibit an idealized world through the act of protest. In this case, the means of decision-making become more than an academic question of whether or not the protest was “fair” or representative of its participants. If anarchism is defined by practice, by the pre-figuring of the idealized world that activists hope to create, then the question of whether anarchistic movements can escape from the nature of the established power structures they seek to challenge is eminently important. Further, as a pre-figurative model of the utopian community that the act of protest is “defending”, examining the reproduction and multiplication of inequality
within the protest provides an image of how inequality might be reproduced within the
philosophies social movement actors espouse.

Most Occupy protests used a form of consensus-based participatory democracy, a
technique widely in use in anarchistic and radical movements in the United States and
abroad (Schneider 2011). Participatory democracy is intended, among other things, to
give all participants an equal voice in the proceedings, and is often characterized by hand
signals to gauge the mood of the crowd and intensive revisions of proposals. Consensus
processes are intended to subvert the power of majority rule: when decisions are made, a
single individual can veto or “block” them, even if every other individual in the
movement is in favor of passing the decision – though of course there are ways to
override a block made in bad faith. In part, this addresses the lack of coercive power that
such a fluid social movement has over its participants. After all, a minority whose needs
are not represented might simply “vote with their feet” and leave the protest altogether,
eventually bleeding the movement dry. At Occupy Atlanta, participants were informed
that a block was not to be used to show disapproval of a proposal. If a participant could
not in good conscience support a proposal, they were encouraged to simply abstain, or
“stand aside”. A block, participants were told, was to be used to block a proposed action
“if taking that action would cause you to leave the Occupation”. In this way, consensus
procedures are also a survival mechanism for anarchistic social movements: if they
cannot coerce their participants to abide by a disagreeable decision, and they cannot
coerce them to stay a part of the protest, they either must make sure they do not take
actions drastic enough to drive away participants or they must deal with a dwindling
population of supporters. In a larger sense, as utopian movements prefigure a world without unjust coercive structures – those which force compliance with actions that members find objectionable – consensus-based decision-making models and experiments with the operation of that idealized world. By the same token, the manner in which those processes fail forewarn problems in the alternate culture they seek to create.

Using archival research, interviews, and ethnographic methods, Francesca Polletta tracks the use of participatory democracy as well as the philosophies used to support it in utopian social movements back to the sit-ins of the 1950s, though she notes that it is descended from methods dating to the eighteenth century, including Quaker decision-making formats (Polletta 2004). In the 1950s, participatory democracy was adopted and popularized by activist groups such as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a civil rights organization responsible for the lion’s share of sit-ins in the American South (Ibid.). SNCC chose participatory democracy on the grounds that means and ends go hand in hand, and that, in seeking justice, organizations must act justly as well (Ibid.). These forms were rarely readily visible in popular cultural scripts, especially for student activists whose familiarity with decision-making procedure is likely to come from parliamentary procedure (Ibid.). Consequently, they have depended on generations of older activists handing them down to the next generation (Ibid.). Precursors for participatory democracy can be seen in some of the ideals of early labor movements: while unions of the 1920s and 30s were more autocratic in structure, they embraced democratic pedagogy by establishing schools to produce leaders and members who could advocate for themselves (Ibid.). Participatory democracy was enshrined as a cornerstone
of progressive student activism with the 1962 Port Huron Statement by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), speaking to mankind’s “unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity” and arguing that

As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation. (Hayden 1962)

In 1962, SDS – a largely white organization, which would play out in SNCC’s eventual abandonment of participatory democracy – had borrowed participatory methods from SNCC (Polletta 2004, Polletta 2005). Polletta argues that SNCC adopted participatory democracy as a way to subvert traditional power brokers in progressive movements (Polletta 2004). The clergy had a well-established history of holding power; college educated activists (especially from the North) were more familiar with manipulation of parliamentary procedure (Ibid.). Participatory democracy was intended to break the power of charismatic leadership and introduce a decision-making system equally unfamiliar to all participants (Ibid.). Some of the activists Polletta interviewed characterize participatory democracy as “messy” – and argue that this is in its favor, as the rigid structure of traditional bureaucracy had failed to serve the cause of “human freedom” (Ibid.).
By 1965, SNCC had dropped consensus-based participatory democracy (Polletta 2005). Increasingly used by SDS and SDS-educated activists in the South, consensus-based participatory democracy had become a “white” and middle-class method, privileged toward those who were free to engage in long discussions and invest more energy into activist movements (Ibid.). While once SNCC leaders argued that consensus techniques empowered local leaders and helped subvert the discursive power of the educated middle-class, James Forman – executive secretary when SNCC gave up participatory democracy – claimed that these decision-making processes actually favored middle-class individualism and idealism over practical progress in disenfranchised communities (Ibid.). Polletta argues that white activists who adopted consensus-based processes in the 1960s did not do so because they empowered local communities and helped train leaders; rather, it was favored because it agreed with a radical ethos (Ibid.). As participatory democracy evolved in the world of U.S. radical activism, it accumulated characteristics such as hand signals and “temperature checks”, a body of techniques gradually seen as “Californian” (Ibid.). “Californian” techniques were those which valued self-liberation over concrete accomplishments (Ibid.). Polletta describes these techniques still in use at 2001 meetings of New York City’s chapter of Direct Action Now (DAN), the radical group partially responsible for the Seattle World Trade Organization protests (Polletta 2004). Further, DAN attempted to use a privileged “stack”, in which the order of speakers is adjusted to favor women and people of color in speaking (Ibid.).

Consensus-based participatory democracy has become a tactical frame. Frames are the means by which a social movement motivates and justifies action: they consist of
a diagnosis of a social problem, a prognosis for how that problem can be addressed, and a rationale for why it is appropriate and just to address the problem by those means (Polletta and Ho 2006). A tactical frame is a frame that justifies a goal partly by the means to achieve it (Ibid.). Tactical frames often produce the rationale and justification for collective action (for instance, “Society oppresses minority voices through traditional majority-rules democracy, so we will empower minority voices in our movement by using consensus-based democracy”), but they also restrict tactical flexibility: if part of the rationale for collective action is embedded in the tactics, then to change those tactics compromises the rationale for action (Ibid.). The idea of the tactical frame fits nicely with Graeber’s notion of anarchism-as-practice: anarchistic movements defend the ideals of anarchism by practicing anarchism in their everyday activities. In this way, they are performing their ideals and thereby continually reinforcing their framing. It is the act of consensus-based participatory democracy that defends the utopian world, by refusing to compromise ideals for the sake of perceived efficacy or respectability.

Frames work against activists as much as they work for them: the perception of consensus-based participatory democracy as middle-class and white means that it is difficult for radical progressive movements that use participatory democracy methods to attract minority voices – thereby presenting a face and a set of goals that are, indeed, middle-class and white (Polletta 2005). If anarchist utopian movements are defined by pre-figurative practice of a more egalitarian world, then for that practice to exclude (passively or actively) members of disenfranchised groups becomes a serious problem for
anarchist activists to confront. The question becomes whether people who have been
educated to recognize inequality are even capable of building structures to subvert it.

Social Movements, Labor, and the Free Rider Problem

Three days after the beginning of Occupy Atlanta, on Monday October 10th, the
encampment was galvanized by rumors that the mayor’s office intended to have the
police evict them that night. At the evening’s General Assembly, a speaker asked how
many protesters were willing to be arrested, reminding them that “getting arrested is not a
moral question. It is a tactical one.”

Participation in social movements is economic. Protesters invest substantial
material resources. At Occupy Atlanta, protesters brought tents they knew well might be
destroyed or taken in an eviction. They donated money. Some brought food: often dinner
at Occupy Atlanta was provided by activist groups and artists’ collectives in the city that
had decided to band together in support of the protest. One participant donated a hot air
balloon to be cut into pieces and used as a shelter. Participation might have extended only
as far as material donations: many interviewees told me they only came by to bring food
and occasionally watch General Assemblies.

However, the intangible investment of protesters is just as significant, if not more
so. Protest is labor. Participants donate their time, their energy, and their health to the act
of social protest. They take considerable risks. The decision to risk arrest comes with the
possibility of substantial opportunity costs. While Occupy Atlanta had access to legal
resources, participants were still concerned with determining beforehand how much they
might have to pay if arrested. Traditional theorists have posited social movements as essentially rational attempts by individual actors to address negative social conditions and gain access to power (Price et al. 2008, Diani 1992, Cohen 1985, Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Most treat social movements in concrete terms of dialogue between disenfranchised actors and structures of power, or specific grievances to be settled. The uncritically economic lens of Research Mobilization Theory (RMT) specifically identifies social movements as rational attempts to address grievances (Cohen 1985). In RMT, collective action is spurred by changes in opportunities for collective action (organization, resources, etc.) or newly imposed grievances that expose larger conflicts of interest (Ibid., McAdam 1994).

Theorists of New Social Movements contest RMT on the basis of the rational actor. If theorists presume a rational actor participating in a social movement (donating capital resources including but not limited to social contact, money, time, and labor) in order to achieve redress of grievances, then they must contend with the free rider problem (Cohen 1985, Polletta and Jasper 2001). Further, they cannot explain why those who are not directly politically or economically disadvantaged by the state choose to participate in collective social movements (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Given the example of the sit-ins of the civil rights movement: if the sit-ins accomplished their purpose (challenging segregation), that benefit is reaped by the black community as a whole, at least locally. The individual members of the sit-in, then, are risking a great deal: arrest, physical harm, defamation, even death. Similarly, those who chose to participate in Occupy Atlanta would have reaped the same larger social benefits had they not participated at all; they
would not have to sacrifice their time or energy. The same applies to radical movements of the 1990s, including DAN’s WTO protests: on the individual level, a rational actor perspective demands free riders. Free riders are those who benefit from the success of a social movement without directly investing their own resources or risk in it. This suggests that, if a social movement is understood in terms of individual rational action, there would be no reason for any individual to get involved: after all, they will accrue the same benefits without labor or risk.

The free rider problem may be solved by reference to existing social bonds: in this case, an organizer of collective action is drawing on his or her social capital to pull others into the action, in which case the participant acts rationally by paying or creating a social debt (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Indeed, Polletta’s ethnographic work indicates that often consensus and solidarity in SDS and other progressive movements of the 1960s were achieved through “friendship” (Polletta 2004). Participants may be motivated to invest themselves fully out of reputational concern (Polletta and Jasper 2001). They may also be motivated by identity formation as an active or a radical, in which case a cutting edge tactical frame allows a protest participant to identify themselves as a cutting edge or radical person (Ibid.). However, all of these depend on the individual having a previous social investment in group membership and in activist identity, and in my interviews at Occupy Atlanta, few participants affirmed that they had previous experience with utopian community-building, radical activism, or the vast majority of other participants in the protest. Polletta’s work acknowledges that forms of solidarity based on friendship are rarely maintained once a movement grows beyond a single social group (Polletta 2004).
This is not to say that there were not already activists who knew each other and had pre-existing social bonds at Occupy Atlanta; it is only to say that they were hardly the majority in terms of sheer numbers.

After establishing basic identifiers, my first question to interviewees was, “What do you hope that Occupy will accomplish?” The answers varied widely. One hoped for the end of capitalism; another the return of investigative journalism. One wanted money out of politics; another for the political system to focus on improving the quality of life. The list of official demands, in constant revision by the Demands working group, varied from very specific (“Repeal Citizens United”) to very general (“End the prison-industrial complex”). These broad, national goals condensed into concrete statements on local politics at General Assemblies and protest actions. At a meeting of the Demands working group, held under the shelter of the donated hot air balloon, protesters struggled to put together a list of one-sentence statements for the sake of media comprehension. Eventually the Demands committee split into several smaller “affinity groups”; at a General Assembly, we were told, euphemistically, that the Demands working group was “politically diverse”.

That political diversity is at the heart of the solution to the free rider problem in large social movements. Jean Cohen tries to escape the free rider problem by getting rid of the rational actor altogether (Cohen 1985). She argues that NSMs are about identity formation by actors who are cognizant of how identities and power are constructed in social relations; participation in a social movement is an attempt for the actor remake him
or herself in a new context (Ibid.). However, this model does not require we throw out evaluating protest laborers as economic thinkers. One of the strengths of participatory democracy is that it makes individual activists into stakeholders for all decisions that are made: because they know that they can represent their ideals, they have an expected return-on-investment in the more perfect world that they pre-figure (Polletta 2004, Polletta 2005, Maharawal 2013). In fact, it is that stake in the future of the movement that makes activists more willing to confront risk (Polletta 2004). It is a matter of dispersal of power: spreading the ability to make decisions across multiple working groups without barriers to entry and representation empowers individuals rather than leaders – at least in theory (Price et al 2008). NSMs are often concerned with questioning unequal relations of power; part of the practice of that is in non-rigid, rotating leadership, communal decision-making, and other process techniques intended to subvert traditional sources of individual power inequality (Pichardo 1997). Their means of decision-making was intended to pre-figure an anti-authoritarian end.

If the labor of social movement participants gives them a stake in that movement, and that stake is representation of their voice and their values, then it is significant to ask whether, in terms of representation and discursive power, participants reap equal rewards in the construction of their new social world. NSMs, including Occupy Atlanta, are not composed of people who are ignorant of the dynamics of class and power that shape their movements. At Occupy Atlanta, protesters quoted Marx and Bourdieu on inequality. They halted marches to discuss sexism, racism, and classism. At the eviction of Woodruff Park, some protesters outside the park hurled sexist slurs at female police officers.
Another protester silenced the chanting crowd with a “Mic check!” and then explained that “Sexism is still sexism, even when it’s directed at the police.” At General Assemblies, speakers regularly called for more marginalized voices to be heard, whether queer voices, voices from people of color, undocumented voices, or working class voices. However, it remains necessary to ask whether academic understanding of inequality and the reproduction of inequality is sufficient to subvert it.

*Capital and Complex Equality*

At one cold, dreary General Assembly, the decision-making process broke down. The People’s Mic was used little, if at all. Members of the assembly called for the recall of the moderator-facilitator team, saying that it should not require a full consensus to do so. The team, composed for once of three women, huddled in the center, hands on each other’s shoulders for support. One said, “It is important for the people moderating or facilitating to be a bit aggressive or nothing will get done. It is difficult for us as three women to do this for long without being told we are being rude.” Lucian, the bottom-liner for Logistics, rose to recognize the importance of women’s voices, and asked what could be done to make the moderators’ job less stressful. Later the bottom-liner for Process, Sonia, told me that some protesters proposed female moderator-facilitator teams should only manage all-female assemblies. When I asked whether that was likely to happen, Sonia told me, “Not a chance.” Occupy Atlanta protesters were consciously aware of the ways in which discursive power and authority marginalized certain voices, and made conscious decisions to subvert that marginalization.
Class privilege and power is often harder to distinguish in the context of social movements. Participants may have similar financial resources, but wide disparities in education and social influence (Leondar-Wright 2014). The lack of apparent difference in financial resources has allowed the myth of a classless leftist movement to live on (Ibid.). In writing on class and activism, Betsy Leondar-Wright suggests we draw on Bourdieu’s social, symbolic, and cultural capital to understand relations of class privilege within social movements (Ibid.).

Pierre Bourdieu defined capital as “a concentration of force that operates in a field,” where a field is a social space defined by objective relations between symbolic points (Mahar 1990, Mahar et al 1990). Capital is also “accumulated labor” which individuals or groups may appropriate for exclusive use to achieve some ends (Bourdieu 1986). Generally speaking, Bourdieu outlined four sorts of capital (material, social, symbolic, and cultural), which operate in their respective fields and may be converted over time and space by individual labor (Mahar et al 1990). Capital is labor either done in the present or accumulated from the past that acts forcefully to alter the objective relations between symbolic points. The forces of capital are the strategies by which individuals, consciously or unconsciously, struggle to improve or maintain their position (Mahar et al 1990). Inequality of capital is significant not only on the basis of ideals of fairness, but because the distribution of capital constrains individuals’ choices in the social landscape (Bourdieu 1986). Michael Walzer, writing on equality and distributive justice, assumes that unequal relations of capital will continually be reproduced, but argues that the complex reproduction of capital through conversion from one type to
another (Walzer 1983). In other words, when material capital is used to produce dramatically more cultural capital, which is in turn levied to produce more material capital, dramatic inequalities (and therefore constraint of individual agency) results.

The evolution of Bourdieu’s conceptualization of capital and class was ongoing throughout his intellectual life, and therefore produced inconsistent descriptions and definitions of associated terms. It is most easily subdivided into material, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Mahar et al 1990). However, we must take care not to get caught in trying to determine whether something is symbolic or cultural capital. Bourdieu’s conceptualization is a method of analysis, not definitive classification. Material capital is of little concern to Bourdieu and the subject of this essay, respectively because it is already heavily studied by generations of economists and because intangible resources are more significant in social movements (Bourdieu 1986, Leondar-Wright 2014). It includes the body’s physical capabilities and material resources an individual has access to (Ibid.). At Occupy Atlanta, material capital might include the resources individual protesters had to draw on if they were arrested or fined by the city.

Social capital, in its “lean” formulation, is defined as “the forms and uses of social networks,” including all resources an individual can bring to bear by calling on those social networks (Baker and Faulkner 2009). Practically, it consists of obligations, debts, rights, and expectations of reciprocity, as well as channels of information (Coleman 1998). In short, it is simply faith that resources granted to others will be reciprocated in kind (Portes 1998). At Occupy Atlanta, social capital was manifested most clearly in “affinity groups,” small groups of people who knew and trusted each other. At the first
rumored eviction, the General Assembly split into affinity groups to make individual plans for police action, arguing that doing so made sure that there was not just one strategy in play and that protesters had people they could trust to rely on. Working groups (especially Demands) often split into affinity groups to discuss ideas in a more direct context. This means, however, that those who had more social resources to draw on (whether accrued beforehand or as a result of time spent at the encampment) had the opportunity to test their voice in small groups that could amplify it to the General Assemblies. Further, as protesters began to worry that nebulous opposition groups could plant their own members at the encampment, social capital became a significant means to be recognized as a legitimate participant.

Cultural capital consists of “valued taste and consumption patterns” (Mahar et al 1990). Cultural capital includes the tastes themselves, goods that act as artifacts of that taste, and signifiers of cultural distinction granted by institutions with a great deal of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Occupy Atlanta protesters recognized the significance of cultural capital in being recognized as a part of the movement, if only indirectly. At the eviction, one protester pointed out an individual he believed to be a police officer in disguise. He pointed out that the man was dressed like a protester, but had not been present (and appeared to be speaking into a walkie-talkie). In saying this, he recognized clothing as a means to signal involvement in the protest. Protesters also displayed their understanding of the movement’s ideals by painting slogans on their tents and decorating them with signs.
Symbolic capital is the power to legitimate the conditions of the social world (Mahar et al 1990). Prestige, authority, and status are components of symbolic capital, but they are also products of the application of symbolic capital (Ibid.). Symbolic capital allows an individual to structure the social landscape; as individuals internalize that social landscape, they take it for granted rather than rebelling against it (Bourdieu 1985). Therefore, symbolic capital restricts the use and conversion of other sorts of capital. Symbolic capital is linked to discursive power, the power to speak in a way that is respected and listened to. The bottom-liner for Demands, for instance, displayed symbolic capital in his mastery of the consensus process. By ending each speech with slogans, he could manipulate the audience into uncritically shouting political demands. A humanities education, usually a privilege of middle and upper classes, grants access to bourgeois forms of language, particularly language that is abstracted and intellectualized, which is privileged in discourse (Swartz 1977). This means that the voices that are more “convincing” at General Assemblies are those that can speak in a way that is taught through the university context.

Participants in progressive social movements often try to dissociate themselves from class privilege (Leondar-Wright 2014). Many of these are Voluntarily Downwardly Mobile (VDM): individuals from middle-class to upper middle-class backgrounds who, having avoided professional middle-class careers, consider themselves classless or working class (Ibid.). Nevertheless, VDMs usually hold educational and social resources that the working class does not (Ibid.). Artists’ and intellectuals’ identification with working class struggles is a confusion resulting when they equate cultural conflicts within
their class with structural conflicts between classes (Ibid.). VDMs, for instance, still have a great deal of cultural capital in the form of education: schools act as institutions that pass on a “code” which allows certain values and meanings to be attached to ideas and objects, and access to greater schooling determines access to that code which in turn determines access to schooling (Bourdieu 1967). Further, college-educated activists may build broad social networks through the university context that allow them to draw on more resources in social movements. Through the university context, they learn how to express ideas persuasively and to fit them to their audience, giving them greater discursive power to shape their social world. For instance, Occupy Atlanta denounced sexism, classism, racism, ableism, and a number of other biases within and without the movement. While a noble goal, in practical terms this means that to speak without being silenced protesters must know the right terms and ideas to use, terms and ideas usually learned through a traditional liberal arts education.

Consensus-based participatory democracy privileges those with greater intangible capital resources. Theoretically, every individual gets a voice. In practice, the type of voice is determined by membership in a working group, which is in turn determined by whether one has the time to spare to commit to that working group: this is social capital in action. Theoretically, any individual can speak at a General Assembly. In practice, whether or not that speech is taken seriously is determined by whether or not they express their ideas in the right way: this is symbolic capital in action. When individuals gave long, meandering speeches, the assembly silenced them by twirling their fingers to indicate that they were rambling. The ability to speak “correctly” as well as the
confidence to do so is a product of education. Shaming ramblers silences less traditionally educated voices: this is cultural capital in action. Theoretically, the People’s Mic amplifies every voice equally. In practice, when individuals disagreed with a speaker they might refuse to repeat their words: the People’s Mic fizzled out on unpopular opinions. Theoretically, Occupy Atlanta demanded inclusive language to foster an inclusive environment. In practice, inclusive language is a moving target, and knowledge of the right words is itself a product of a certain traditional liberal arts education. Theoretically, the Process working group modified the consensus process continually to ensure better representation. In practice, a continually changing decision-making process privileges those with the resources to learn and adapt to novel social environments quickly. The distribution of intangible forms of capital determined the amplification and significance of individual voices at Occupy Atlanta.

Relations of power are created and maintained by “communicative interaction,” the linguistically intermediated process through which relationship types are established and actions coordinated, a fact that NSM organizers are usually conscious of and consciously attempt to subvert (Cohen 1985, Pichardo 1997). Some members of a protest will have more access to discursive power, and therefore a greater ability to define the protest. Espousing leaderlessness, individuals can nevertheless become informal leaders by their ability to define the protest’s purpose and meaning (Freeman 1972). Their voices are amplified by the news media, which represents them as spokespeople of a movement (Ibid.). Polletta argues that disparate access to leadership is countered by complex equality: in contrast to strict equality, complex equality is the equal valuation of skillsets
and labor types (Polletta 2004). Egalitarian social movements attempt to provide equal symbolic capital to all labor undertaken, presumably preventing one participant from levying higher status labor into greater representation or influence. Greater representation, however, is not a matter of the valuation of labor: it is a result of the capital that individuals may bring to bear.

If individuals invest their labor into a social movement in exchange for a stake, an expectation of representation, and if that representation is unequally determined by their cultural, social, and symbolic capital, then they are cheated of their voices. Movement leaders consciously try to subvert unequal relations of power, but the key element of non-material capital is *misrecognition* (Pichardo 1997, Mahar *et al* 1990). Individuals are unconsciously aware of their place in the social landscape (Bourdieu 1985). Practical mastery of the social structure as a whole is demonstrated by class unconsciousness: in short, “knowing your place” in society is a vital part of mastering it (Ibid.).

This presents an essential problematic: who can recognize inequality well enough to subvert it? For Bourdieu, it is the sociologist that takes a critical eye to society (Citton 2010). Yet this seems unlikely: within Bourdieu’s formulation of the operation of capital, the sociologist must be *less* capable. The professional sociologist has attained a high level of cultural and symbolic capital; they have demonstrated great mastery of their social field. For Bourdieu, mastery of the social field is dependent on unconsciously internalizing it. There seems to be a paradox at work: recognition of inequality is a result of critical learning, but that critical learning itself enculturates the sociologist further into their social field and therefore produces greater class unconsciousness.
Bourdieu’s critical social scientist is descended through his teacher Althusser, who reiterated the Platonic model of society in which there are those who can understand social structures as they really are and those who can only perceive the socially constructed illusion (Deranty 2010a). Althusser distinguished science from ideology: science (particularly critical Marxism) can perceive the structures of inequality, while ideology does not see beyond the social world (Ibid.). Althusser was reluctant to attribute conscious agency to the lower classes without the aid of party intellectuals (Mecchia 2010). However, Betsy Leondar-Wright’s study of participants in egalitarian social movements found that traditionally educated participants (i.e., those with more cultural and symbolic capital) are less likely to perceive class inequality in their own social worlds (2014). Occupy Atlanta demonstrated the same problem. Critical awareness did not lead to the subversion of inequality. Rather, critical awareness of inequality continued to reproduce it through more subtle means. The unfortunate result of analyzing social movements through Bourdieu seems to be that no one can escape inequality: no matter what, unequal relations of power will be reproduced. In the next chapter, I argue that this analysis is unsatisfactory: we must analyze the means by which people achieve change and produce equality.

Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation of capital and inequality was not intended as an absolute delineation of the ways that social systems operate. Indeed, Bourdieu himself insisted that he only produced a method to analyze the world, not a model of the world (Mahar et al 1990). That method begins from the assumption, first, that inequality of non-material capital exists. Inequality is not a matter of which non-material resources
individuals and classes have access to, but rather the fact that all non-material capital is material capital in disguise (Ibid.). Cultural capital, symbolic capital, and social capital are material capital masquerading as something else and, per Bourdieu, only continue to operate so long as their operations remain misrecognized (Citton 2010). In short, because the poor cannot see that their lack of educational success (and therefore consequent lack of accrued cultural capital) is really a matter of material capital, they will continue to fail educationally and continue to be trapped in marginalization (Ibid.).

Jacques Ranciere, another student and writing partner of Althusser, critiqued the idea that inequality must be reproduced through misrecognition. Ranciere pointed to the 1973 Lip Factory Strike and the 1968 Student Revolts as counter-evidence to Althusser and Bourdieu’s critical social scientist (Deranty 2010a). Both events, he argued, show that workers can on their own identify, articulate, and denounce their oppression, then work to create new social worlds without the guidance of critical social science (Ibid.). Althusser and Bourdieu did not recognize either event as conscious agency on the part of workers (Mecchia 2010). Constructing misrecognition defends the place of critical social science: if laborers cannot become conscious of their oppression on their own, then a social scientist must articulate it for them (Ibid.). Laborers, therefore, are marginalized more by a social science narrative that fails to recognize their ability to articulate their own plight (Deranty 2010b). In seeking evidence for the reproduction of inequality through misrecognition, social scientists themselves create inequality: particularly intellectual inequality, the unequal ability to understand one’s own social world. Gramsci argued that, since subaltern classes’ history is subsumed in state history, to understand
the subaltern we must seek out every moment of independent initiative and rebellion (Gramsci 1937[1971]). If the norm is marginalization, then the anthropological project must be to seek evidence of the ways that individuals recognize and articulate oppression, as well as the ways they work to create egalitarian culture through practice. In the next chapter, I explore the assumption of intellectual equality at Occupy Atlanta, and the political context created by that assumption.
Chapter 4: Rejecting John Lewis and Presupposing Equality

A thin bearded man speaks into a megaphone mic, the speaker held over his head by another man. He pauses periodically while the assembled protesters relay his words out to the edges of the crowd.

“We have someone here – who would like – to address the assembly. – That person – is Congressman – John Lewis.” Clapping and cheers break out in the crowd.

The thin man, who is playing the role of moderator at Occupy Atlanta’s first General Assembly in Woodruff Park, continues: “How do we feel – with hand signs please – let me take a moment – to explain why – we use hand signs – clapping – can prevent someone else – who is addressing the assembly – from being heard.”

John Lewis and his staff are conferring. A few are smiling, laughing, and gesturing. John Lewis, a broadly built black man in his seventies, does not laugh or smile. He watches the moderator and glances over the assembly, hands folded in front of him.

“We want everyone’s voice – to be heard. – To signal approval – wave your hands – or your fingers – or do a thumbs up – that way – we can hear each other. – How do we feel – about Congressman – John Lewis – addressing the assembly” – here the crowd begins to cheer, and some wave their fingers in the air to signal approval “– at this time?”
Congressman John Lewis is a widely respected civil rights icon. Formerly a leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, he is considered one of the “Big Six” of the civil rights movement. Therefore it came as a shock when a minority of Occupy Atlanta protesters blocked his attempt to address the assembly. The bottom-liner for the Demands working group, who would later call for the beginning of the Occupation, stood and said:

“I first would like to – acknowledge the invaluable work – that Congressman John Lewis – has dedicated his life to. – He has fought for the freedom – and the dignity and respect – of countless lives. – However – the point of this General Assembly – is to kickstart – a democratic process – in which no singular human being – is inherently more valuable – than any other human being.” Cheers and clapping break out.

The moderator took a temperature check; he announced that the assembly seemed to agree with the block. A few voices shouted “No!” and “Let him speak!” Another protester rose to address the block, a young woman in a bright pink coat. She rose and walked to the center of the assembly to speak.

“Allowing Senator Lewis to speak – does not make him a better human being. – It just says – that we respect the work he’s done – and the position that he holds – in the government we want to change. – People like John Lewis – have just as much right – to be part of the change – as to be part of the problem. – Having him here is an honor – and I hope we can hear what he has to say.”

More protesters cheered; more wiggled their fingers in the air in approval.
However, the block was not bypassed. One protester suggested John Lewis stay and speak once the assembly had made its way through its initial business. One of the congressman’s team informed the moderator/facilitator team that John Lewis had a meeting in a few hours, and could not stay indefinitely. Congressman John Lewis left the protest without speaking.

This moment, before the occupation of Woodruff Park even began, became the defining moment of Occupy Atlanta. As John Lewis left, so did many of the assembled protesters, packing their blankets and signs and leaving the assembly. When the General Assembly recessed to discuss beginning an occupation, I found many knots of passionate, angry conversation over the rejection of John Lewis. When the assembled protesters discussed beginning an occupation, those who dissented cited lack of minority representation and John Lewis’s rejection.

That moment endures. When Occupy Atlanta is discussed in popular and academic press, the rejection of John Lewis is inevitably mentioned as an emblem of the protest’s troubling race relations. While I was present at this event, my transcription relies heavily on a YouTube video posted by a group called ConservARTive, titled “Occupy Atlanta Silences Civil Rights Hero John Lewis!” The description begins “What we saw at the ‘revolution’” and continues

The facilitator made it clear that he was not a “leader” and that everyone was completely equal; words often spoken by leftists, but in this case they actually applied their philosophy… It was reminiscent of previous Marxist revolutions in history when those who ignorantly supported the
revolutionaries are, over time, purged and rejected for the “good of the collective”, when their usefulness has expired. (ConservARTive 2011)

Throughout the video, the people filming can be heard laughing and expressing their disbelief, as well as pointing out John Lewis’s surprise. This video has been viewed over half a million times.

Without historical context and within the creators’ analysis, the video is a damning critique of Occupy Atlanta. However, political figures like John Lewis, even those who are “civil rights heroes,” are ambiguous figures in the race and class politics of Atlanta. Occupy Atlanta’s rejection of Congressman John Lewis was a refutation of the role that spokespeople, wealthy in cultural, social, and symbolic capital, have taken in defining urban politics. The rejection of John Lewis and the production of a disorderly space in the city were efforts to enact a different fiction than that of critical social science: one in which the equal ability of all people to participate in a political process was assumed and validated. By presuming the equality of its membership, Occupy Atlanta’s General Assembly acted against the reproduction of inequality, and denied the right of the influential to determine a movement.

Class, Race, and Atlanta

Atlanta is governed by a regime of affluent black elites and large corporate business interests, an alliance forged by Mayor Hartsfield and the Negro Voters’ League in the 1940s (Stone 1976, Hobson 2010). In 1955, upon de-segregating the city’s golf courses, Mayor Hartsfield announced Atlanta was “the city too busy to hate,” a slogan that would endure and often be answered with “I’d hate to be there when they find the time”
Sjoquist 2000). A questionable proposition, “the city too busy to hate” was a statement of priorities to the nation at large in response to the growing racial unrest of the American South (Ibid.). The slogan was part of an economic growth plan, an attempt to subvert the deterrence of investment in a Southern city by the possibility of racial unrest (Waugh-Benton 2006). “The city too busy to hate,” notably, does not address racial or economic grievances; it merely avoids displays of racial unrest that might have economic consequences for the power structure (Sjoquist 2000). While black elites have long held political power in the city of Atlanta, that power was not evenly distributed across class lines and not always committed to addressing economic grievances.

Clarence Stone, riffing on a series produced by Atlanta Journal reporters, argued for “two Atlantas”: a city of glamor and prosperity, and a city of poverty and neglect (Stone 1976). Maurice Hobson argued for three: a white Atlanta, an Atlanta for the black elite, and an Atlanta for the black poor and working class (Hobson 2010). The black elite is defined by W.E.B. Dubois’s “Talented Tenth,” the ten percent of black Atlantans with higher education and middle class backgrounds, consolidated through exclusive social clubs and churches (Ibid.). This has produced “Atlanta-style” racial politics, in which a small number of black elites act as spokespeople for the entire black community, without input or explicit consent of the larger community (Ibid.). While they advocate for and elaborate the role of the black community, rarely will they act to challenge the economic and political power structure of Atlanta.

While the Talented Tenth produced avid civil rights activists in the 1950s and 60s that used Atlanta as their home base, their reputations were marred once they achieved
political office in the 1970s. Further, while the Talented Tenth have been constructed as the leaders of the civil rights movement in national narratives, the civil rights movement was often driven by a significant subaltern class of domestic workers and laborers protesting economic grievances (Waugh-Benton 2006). The summers of 1966 and 1967 saw seemingly spontaneous movements in Atlanta’s slum neighborhoods demanding improvement of immediate economic conditions (Ibid.). In 1970s, the city’s sanitation workers went on strike for a month, garnering the support of the NAACP and SNCC (Ibid.). Indeed, Atlanta’s first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, bolstered his successful 1973 campaign with his involvement in the 1970 strike (Ibid.). However, once in office, elites who acted as spokespeople for Atlanta’s urban economic movements quickly lost the favor of economic activists. Sam Massell, a white Atlanta politician, was elected Vice Mayor by directly appealing to the black community, and upon election placed black citizens in leadership positions within his administration (Ibid.). Having seen little improvement in their neighborhoods since the election of Massell, poor black people in Atlanta saw the black officials in his administration as selling their neighborhoods short (Ibid.).

In the 1970s, established black political organizations began to shy away from association with radical economics-focused movements. In 1972, the Black United Front (BUF) was founded to act as an arm of protest to teach poor black Atlantans that many of their problems stemmed from economic rather than racial injustice (Waugh-Benton 2006). The Southern Christian Leadership Conference refused affiliation, especially as the BUF began protests against black-owned-and-run Citizens Trust Bank (Ibid.). When
black workers went on strike against Atlanta’s Mead plant in 1972, civil rights leaders were no longer political outsiders fighting against an entrenched white political hierarchy (Ibid.). Andrew Young, now chairman of the Community Relations Committee, took his role to be mediating between strikers and businesses rather than marching (Ibid.). The election of Maynard Jackson in 1973, the city’s first black mayor and even the first black mayor of a major Southern city, was hailed as a revolutionary moment in Southern politics (Ibid). Once in office, Jackson began to enforce affirmative action policies, awarding city contracts to corporations that could demonstrate minority involvement and naming minority leaders to civic positions (Ibid.). For the most part, however, Jackson’s reforms expanded opportunity for the black middle class, not the burgeoning urban poor (Ibid.). Though he took office on his support for the 1970 sanitation workers strike, when sanitation workers struck again in 1977, Jackson took sides against it and vowed to “run the communists out” of Atlanta (Ibid.).

Those who spoke in favor of inviting Representative John Lewis to address the General Assembly referenced respect for his political position and for his history of service. Even the more critical description from the ConservARTive video constructs Lewis as a heroic figure and as an established leader within modern leftist movements. While other civil rights figures have lost credibility within movements for economic justice in Atlanta, John Lewis has remained relatively well-respected, keeping economic grievances close in his political agenda. However, he came to Occupy Atlanta as a representative of a larger history in which his background as civil rights figure and his political position placed him outside the tactical frame that protesters were constructing.
Urban insurgency is a matter of operating outside of established political channels, claiming space in such a way that is inherently a challenge to utopian planning of any kind of power brokers (Holston 2012). Occupy Atlanta protesters, by rejecting John Lewis, claimed social space in which established leaders could not demand the right to speak by their simple presence. The rejection of Congressman Lewis was a deliberate refutation of “Atlanta-style” politics and the primacy of established spokespeople.

_Presupposing Equality_

The key framing, at this initial moment of Occupy Atlanta, came from the bottom-liner for Demands: “The point of this General Assembly is to kickstart a democratic process in which no one human being is inherently more valuable than any other human being.” Yet others protested, arguing that simply allowing John Lewis to speak would not place him in a position of greater importance. Later on, as the assembly recessed to discuss beginning the occupation of Woodruff Park, one particularly incensed protester, laden with signs, insisted that Congressman Lewis should not have been blocked from speaking. He said that he understood the rationale, but, “All I’m saying – all I’m saying is, someone like that, we should hear what he has to say.” What could be the harm in allowing John Lewis to speak? Rejecting John Lewis is significant not only in avoiding integration into an existing political narrative, but also as a constructive act in the early framing of the protest. By blocking John Lewis with the justification that he ought not be more valuable or important than any other, protesters created a fiction in which equality was assumed from the beginning. By presupposing the equality of all participants and acting to maintain that presupposition, Occupy Atlanta participants subverted Bourdieu’s
reproduction of inequality and allowed themselves to create structures that permitted individual agency.

For Bourdieu, *habitus* is one of the most significant factors in determining human behavior (Mahar *et al* 1990). Habitus is the set of “structuring structures” produced by an environmental context (Bourdieu 1977). If social life is a game (an analogy Bourdieu used often), then habitus is an individual’s unconscious understanding of the rules of the game (Mahar *et al* 1990). The dominant habitus is created by the use of symbolic capital, constructing the world through knowledge (Ibid.). While individuals may appear to make decisions based on anticipation of future events, in fact their decisions are a result of past conditions (Bourdieu 1977). As a form of knowledge, habitus exists unconsciously, in the moment of decision-making (Bourdieu 1982). In short: the set of taken-for-granted social lessons learned through past experiences define future behavior in snap decisions. Bourdieu argued against a strictly mechanistic understanding of human behavior through habitus, though cautioning that we should not go so far as to presume creative free will (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu, however, will admit the ability to alter habitus to those who can recognize it (once more, through critical social science) (Ibid.). To avoid creating inequality by assigning that ability only to critical social scientists, the anthropologist must seek to democratize engagement with habitus. This means recognizing the ability of all people to recognize and critically engage with social structures, and create new structures. At Occupy Atlanta, protesters broke with the assumption of inequality to create a more equal commons.
Bourdieu’s formulation of inequality depends on misrecognition. Because the disenfranchised cannot recognize the operation of capital, they take it for granted rather than subvert it (Bourdieu 1985). Jacques Ranciere took this as the beginning of his critique of Bourdieu (Citton 2010). Ranciere argued that the structures that reproduce and multiply inequality are not misrecognized by the working classes, but that Bourdieu’s analytical framework only functions for the study of inequality if it is misrecognized (Pelletier 2009). Instead, Ranciere argued that that inequality is produced by social scientists and well-intentioned informers who would educate the populace so that they can be political participants (Ibid.). Bourdieu reiterates the platonic argument that only certain individuals in society are capable of recognizing the structures that shape society, the same argument upon which critical Marxism is based (Ibid.). In doing so, we make equality a moving target (Citton 2010). In that framework, equality can only be achieved by educating the masses until they are capable of understanding their circumstance so that they may recognize and act upon it (Pelletier 2009). But when are the masses educated enough? When have they reached the level of recognition in order to participate as equals?

By contrast, Ranciere argues that the dominated are not marginalized by their misrecognition of their social circumstance (Deranty 2010a). Instead, they are marginalized by a political and scientific discourse that does not take their analyses seriously (Ibid.). They are marginalized by their lack of symbolic capital, yes, but more so by the fact that the discourse of critical Marxism constructs the ignorance of the marginalized. Ranciere insists that the discourse of the marginalized recognizes
inequality; their recognition simply is not academic enough to be considered valid by social scientists (Pelletier 2009). Ranciere pointed out that the Lip Factory Strike of 1973 and the 1968 Student Revolts show that workers can independently identify and denounce their marginalization, then articulate new collective worlds without the aid of social scientific perspectives (Deranty 2010a). However, because critical discourse depends on the idea that inequality is not recognizable to the marginalized, marginalized peoples’ recognition of inequality must be dismissed by critical theorists.

Betsy Leondar-Wright’s study of egalitarian social movements verifies Ranciere’s argument. In her surveys and interviews, she notes that middle class and VDM participants in social movements do misrecognize class: they do not notice their own class privilege or argue for the existence of a classless movement (Leondar-Wright 2014). Working class participants in social movements, however, do not misrecognize class. Leondar-Wright repeatedly notes that working class participants recognize class in different forms (Ibid.). They may not explicitly name it as class privilege. However, many of her working class or lower class informants point out that some participants are living paycheck to paycheck while others are not; that some have a liberal arts education to fall back on and to use to their advantage in discussions; that some are disadvantaged in the movement because of the constraints of labor (Ibid.). Leondar-Wright points out that working class and lower class informants were more likely to use colloquial terms for class and to point out “concrete, class-related proximate facts” (Ibid.). In each of these instances, her working class and lower class informants are recognizing class and
class privilege, as well as recognizing the specific mechanisms by which class may privilege certain participants in social movements.

Bourdieu’s discourse claims that marginalized groups do not recognize the structure of their marginalization, and therefore must reproduce it unless a critical scientific eye can identify that structure and educate them. While this claim is intuitively powerful, it does not hold water in the face of Leondar-Wright’s evidence. Leondar-Wright demonstrates that it is those who are more educated and have more capital who will misrecognize the operation of cultural capital. Further, with the best of intentions, critical discourse intended to expose inequality in fact produces it.

Misrecognition and the reproduction of inequality are the assumptions of Bourdieu’s method. Analysts working through that lens might have proscriptions for Occupy Atlanta protesters to subvert in the reproduction of inequality. They might suggest a proper arm of education to teach participants the particular structures of oppression. They might find ways to make influence dependent on education, in order to avoid losing a strong critical discipline. They might welcome Congressman John Lewis to speak: after all, this sort of analysis welcomes the influence of experts with a keen critical eye to expose the elements of misrecognition. However, that misrecognition is an assumption, and one which, per Leondar-Wright’s work, does not appear to fit the evidence of the world. Instead, Ranciere begins with the presupposition of equality: equal ability to recognize and understand the operations of the social world (Ranciere 1991). With that presupposition, social scientists ought to understand the world in terms of
recognition, seeking evidence for the masses’ ability to identify the nature of their marginalization.

Occupy Atlanta protesters began by laying claim to the common spaces of the city, and then determining the cultural meaning of those spaces. Commons are not simply concrete parcels of land: they are a set of dynamic relations between social groups and the environment that they need (Harvey 2013). Political action is the production of those common spaces for active engagement with the urban landscape (Ibid.). While the commons are continuously produced, they are also continuously enclosed (Ibid.). By rejecting John Lewis, protesters defended the commons they were creating from appropriation into an existing political discourse. Instead, they attempted to create a space in which no voice would be more valuable due to leadership or expertise. While the local news media attempted to designate certain speakers as “leaders” of the occupation, those “leaders” deliberately rejected that position and spoke less in response. By their actions, protesters declared they did not need a Gramscian organic intellectual to articulate the needs and goals of their movement. Instead, they built a commons in which any one voice could speak, and in which voices that were heard less were deliberately sought out (Syrek 2012). Using absolute consensus, even voices that could not make themselves heard had the power to determine the course of the entire movement. Each action assumed equality. From the first moment, Occupy Atlanta protesters worked to create a space that subverted intellectual leadership, and consequently verified the equality of each individual actor.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

After the eviction from Woodruff Park, Occupy Atlanta lived on. In the moment of that night, Occupy Atlanta lived on: protesters followed police cars on foot to the jail and occupied the street outside into the early hours of the morning. Soon after, they held another General Assembly at Atlanta’s Centennial Olympic Park, a public greenspace owned and operated by the local convention center, The Georgia World Congress Center. Barricades still enclosed Woodruff Park. City officials said that the park would be closed indefinitely for maintenance. In the shadow of the CNN Center and Atlanta’s tourism spectacles, Centennial Olympic Park was a rather different space to meet than Woodruff Park had been. The assembly took place in a small amphitheater; realizing the lawn was artificial, one participant joked they were meeting on “the Astroturf of the One Percent.” A helicopter buzzed overhead; one protester pointed out members of the mayor’s staff watching the assembly. At this, the first General Assembly since eviction, they shared stories of arrest and advice for handling the police, and then made plans for how the movement would handle the ongoing winter.

Occupy Atlanta was one of the few Occupy protests that survived the winter, occupying a downtown homeless shelter in danger of eviction and foreclosed homes across the metropolitan area. In the spring, they became a visible part of the city again. Through deliberate action, Occupy Atlanta protesters engaged with urban culture to make
a space for insurgency and dissent. Through policies that assumed the equal agency and intelligence of their participants, they insured that the commons they created assumed and therefore produced equality. Each step of the Occupy Atlanta process dramatized equality, producing egalitarianism as action rather than as prospect. Rather than assume inequality and work to mitigate it, Occupy Atlanta protesters performed dissent as though all dissenters were already equal, and thereby created spaces of egalitarian insurgency.

This thesis is fundamentally concerned with the role of critical social science in egalitarian movements. Through ethnography of Occupy Atlanta, I evaluated whether or not the fictions produced by anthropologists and other social scientists helps social movement participants mitigate the reproduction of inequality. I chose to shift the focus of the question: rather than asking whether protesters can subvert inequality, I asked how the knowledge produced by critical social science can subvert inequality. Anthropologists and other social scientists have a role in constructing culture through the construction of knowledge, as a group of cultural actors with a great deal of cultural capital. I argue that seeking evidence of inequality in the present constructs and produces inequality by dismissing marginalized people’s recognition of their own lives and trapping them in the reproduction of inequality. Instead, we must construct equality by seeking evidence of marginalized people’s understanding of their social world. Because fieldworkers do not operate outside of their research participants’ cultural world, we must change our field methods to those that verify our participants’ recognition of their own experience and their equality as creators of cultural knowledge. I chose to do so by opening the fieldwork process and making it into a dialogue between equal conversants. Going forward,
anthropologists must seek the means to critically analyze oppression and marginalization without shutting marginalized peoples out of the conversation by assuming that they cannot understand their own circumstances without the aid of critical social science
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