“The same people who are murdered slowly in the mechanized slaughterhouses of work are also arguing, singing, drinking, dancing, making love, holding the streets, picking up weapons and inventing a new poetry.”
Demonstrations under the banner of Occupy Wall Street resonate with so many people not only because they give voice to a widespread sense of economic injustice but also, and perhaps more important, because they express political grievances and aspirations. As protests have spread from Lower Manhattan to cities and towns across the country, they have made clear that indignation against corporate greed and economic inequality is real and deep. But at least equally important is the protest against the lack -- or failure -- of political representation. It is not so much a question of whether this or that politician, or this or that party, is ineffective or corrupt (although that, too, is true) but whether the representational political system more generally is inadequate. This protest movement could, and perhaps must, transform into a genuine, democratic constituent process.

The political face of the Occupy Wall Street protests comes into view when we situate it alongside the other “encampments” of the past year. Together, they form an emerging cycle of struggles. In many cases, the lines of influence are explicit. Occupy Wall Street takes inspiration from the encampments of central squares in Spain, which began on May 15 and followed the occupation of Cairo’s Tahrir Square earlier last spring. To this succession of demonstrations, one should add a series of parallel events, such as the extended protests at the Wisconsin statehouse, the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens, and the Israeli tent encampments for economic justice. The context of these various protests are very different, of course, and they are not simply iterations of what happened elsewhere. Rather each of these movements has managed to translate a few common elements into their own situation.

In Tahrir Square, the political nature of the encampment and the fact that the protesters could not be represented in any sense by the current regime was obvious. The demand that “Mubarak must go” proved powerful enough to encompass all other issues. In the subsequent encampments of Madrid’s Puerta del Sol and Barcelona’s Plaça Catalunya, the critique of political representation was more complex. The Spanish protests brought together a wide array of social and economic complaints -- regarding debt, housing, and education, among others -- but their “indignation,” which the Spanish press early on identified as their defining affect, was clearly directed at a political system incapable of addressing these issues. Against the pretense of democracy offered by the current representational system, the protesters posed as one of their central slogans, “Democracia real ya,” or “Real democracy now.”

Occupy Wall Street should be understood, then, as a further development or permutation of these political demands. One obvious and clear message of the protests, of course, is that the bankers and finance industries in no way represent us: What is good for Wall Street is certainly not good for the country (or the world). A more significant failure of representation, though, must be attributed to the politicians and political parties charged with representing the people’s interests but in fact more clearly represent the banks and the creditors. Such a recognition leads to a seemingly naive, basic question: Is democracy not supposed to be the rule of the people over the polis -- that is, the entirety of social and economic life? Instead, it seems that politics has become subservient to economic and financial interests.

By insisting on the political nature of the Occupy Wall Street protests we do not mean to cast them merely in terms of the quarrels between Republicans and Democrats, or the fortunes of the Obama administration. If the movement does continue and grow, of course, it may force the White House or Congress to take new action, and it may even become a significant point of contention during the next presidential election cycle. But the Obama and the George W. Bush administrations are both authors of the bank bailouts; the lack of representation highlighted by the protests applies to both parties. In this context, the Spanish call for “real democracy now” sounds both urgent and challenging.

If together these different protest encampments -- from Cairo and Tel Aviv to Athens, Madison, Madrid, and now New York -- express a dissatisfaction with the existing structures of political representation, then what do they offer as an alternative? What is the “real democracy” they propose?

The clearest clues lie in the internal organization of the movements themselves --
specifically, the way the encampments experiment with new democratic practices. These movements have all developed according to what we call a “multitude form” and are characterized by frequent assemblies and participatory decision-making structures. (And it is worth recognizing in this regard that Occupy Wall Street and many of these other demonstrations also have deep roots in the globalization protest movements that stretched at least from Seattle in 1999 to Genoa in 2001.)

Much has been made of the way social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been employed in these encampments. Such network instruments do not create the movements, of course, but they are convenient tools, because they correspond in some sense to the horizontal network structure and democratic experiments of the movements themselves. Twitter, in other words, is useful not only for announcing an event but for polling the views of a large assembly on a specific decision in real time.

Do not wait for the encampments, then, to develop leaders or political representatives. No Martin Luther King, Jr. will emerge from the occupations of Wall Street and beyond. For better or worse -- and we are certainly among those who find this a promising development -- this emerging cycle of movements will express itself through horizontal participatory structures, without representatives. Such small-scale experiments in democratic organizing would have to be developed much further, of course, before they could articulate effective models for a social alternative, but they are already powerfully expressing the aspiration for a “real democracy.”

Confronting the crisis and seeing clearly the way it is being managed by the current political system, young people populating the various encampments are, with an unexpected maturity, beginning to pose a challenging question: If democracy -- that is, the democracy we have been given -- is staggering under the blows of the economic crisis and is powerless to assert the will and interests of the multitude, then is now perhaps the moment to consider that form of democracy obsolete?

If the forces of wealth and finance have come to dominate supposedly democratic constitutions, including the U.S. Constitution, is it not possible and even necessary today to propose and construct new constitutional figures that can open avenues to again take up the project of the pursuit of collective happiness? With such reasoning and such demands, which were already very alive in the Mediterranean and European encampments, the protests spreading from Wall Street across the United States pose the need for a new democratic constituent process.

We are all losers, but the true losers are down there on Wall Street. They were bailed out by billions of our money. We are called socialists, but here there is always socialism for the rich. They say we don’t respect private property, but in the 2008 financial crash-down more hard-earned private property was destroyed than if all of us here were to be destroying it night and day for weeks. They tell you we are dreamers. The true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are. We are not dreamers. We are the awakening from a dream that is turning into a nightmare.

We are not destroying anything. We are only witnessing how the system is destroying itself. We all know the classic scene from cartoons. The cat reaches a precipice but it goes on walking, ignoring the fact that there is nothing beneath this ground. Only when it looks down and notices it, it falls down. This is what we are doing here. We are telling the guys there on Wall Street, “Hey, look down!”

In mid-April 2011, the Chinese government prohibited on TV, films, and novels all stories that contain alternate reality or time travel. This is a good sign for China. These people still dream about alternatives, so you have to prohibit this dreaming. Here, we don’t need a prohibition because the ruling system has even oppressed our capacity to dream. Look at the movies that we see all the time. It’s easy to imagine the end of the world. An asteroid destroying all life and so on. But you cannot imagine the end of capitalism.

So what are we doing here? Let me tell you a wonderful, old joke from Communist
times. A guy was sent from East Germany to work in Siberia. He knew his mail would be read by censors, so he told his friends: “Let’s establish a code. If a letter you get from me is written in blue ink, it is true what I say. If it is written in red ink, it is false.” After a month, his friends get the first letter. Everything is in blue. It says, this letter: “Everything is wonderful here. Stores are full of good food. Movie theatres show good films from the west. Apartments are large and luxurious. The only thing you cannot buy is red ink.” This is how we live. We have all the freedoms we want. But what we are missing is red ink: the language to articulate our non-freedom. The way we are taught to speak about freedom—war on terror and so on—falsifies freedom. And this is what you are doing here. You are giving all of us red ink.

There is a danger. Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then? I don’t want you to remember these days, you know, like “Oh. we were young and it was beautiful.” Remember that our basic message is “We are allowed to think about alternatives.” If the rule is broken, we do not live in the best possible world. But there is a long road ahead. There are truly difficult questions that confront us. We know what we do not want. But what do we want? What social organization can replace capitalism? What type of new leaders do we want?

Remember. The problem is not corruption or greed. The problem is the system. It forces you to be corrupt. Beware not only of the enemies, but also of false friends who are already working to dilute this process. In the same way you get coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol, ice cream without fat, they will try to make this into a harmless, moral protest. A decaffeinated process. But the reason we are here is that we have had enough of a world where, to recycle Coke cans, to give a couple of dollars for charity, or to buy a Starbucks cappuccino where 1% goes to third world starving children is enough to make us feel good. After outsourcing work and torture, after marriage agencies are now outsourcing our love life, we can see that for a long time, we allow our political engagement also to be outsourced. We want it back.

We are not Communists if Communism means a system which collapsed in 1990. Remember that today those Communists are the most efficient, ruthless Capitalists. In China today, we have Capitalism which is even more dynamic than your American Capitalism, but doesn’t need democracy. Which means when you criticize Capitalism, don’t allow yourself to be blackmailed that you are against democracy. The marriage between democracy and Capitalism is over. The change is possible.

What do we perceive today as possible? Just follow the media. On the one hand, in technology and sexuality, everything seems to be possible. You can travel to the moon, you can become immortal by biogenetics, you can have sex with animals or whatever, but look at the field of society and economy. There, almost everything is considered impossible. You want to raise taxes by little bit for the rich. They tell you it’s impossible. We lose competitiveness. You want more money for health care, they tell you, “Impossible, this means totalitarian state.” There’s something wrong in the world, where you are promised to be immortal but cannot spend a little bit more for healthcare. Maybe we need to set our priorities straight here. We don’t want higher standard of living. We want a better standard of living. The only sense in which we are Communists is that we care for the commons. The commons of nature. The commons of privatized by intellectual property. The commons of biogenetics. For this, and only for this, we should fight.

Communism failed absolutely, but the problems of the commons are here. They are telling you we are not American here. But the conservatives fundamentalists who claim they really are American have to be reminded of something: What is Christianity? It’s the holy spirit. What is the holy spirit? It’s an egalitarian community of believers who are linked by love for each other, and who only have their own freedom and responsibility to do it. In this sense, the holy spirit is here now. And down there on Wall Street, there are pagans who are worshipping blasphemous idols. So all we need is patience. The only thing I’m afraid of is that we will someday just go home and then we will meet once a year, drinking beer, and nostalgically remembering “What a nice time we had here.” Promise yourselves that this will not be the case. We know that people often desire something but do not really want it. Don’t be afraid to really want what you desire. Thank you very much.
I love you.

And I didn’t just say that so that hundreds of you would shout “I love you” back, though that is obviously a bonus feature of the human microphone. Say unto others what you would have them say unto you, only way louder.

Yesterday, one of the speakers at the labor rally said: “We found each other.” That sentiment captures the beauty of what is being created here. A wide-open space (as well as an idea so big it can’t be contained by any space) for all the people who want a better world to find each other. We are so grateful.

If there is one thing I know, it is that the 1 percent loves a crisis. When people are panicked and desperate and no one seems to know what to do, that is the ideal time to push through their wish list of pro-corporate policies: privatizing education and social security, slashing public services, getting rid of the last constraints on corporate power. Amidst the economic crisis, this is happening the world over.

And there is only one thing that can block this tactic, and fortunately, it’s a very big thing: the 99 percent. And that 99 percent is taking to the streets from Madison to Madrid to say “No. We will not pay for your crisis.”

That slogan began in Italy in 2008. It ricocheted to Greece and France and Ireland and finally it has made its way to the square mile where the crisis began.
We pointed out that the deregulation behind the frenzy came at a price. It was damaging to labor standards. It was damaging to environmental standards. Corporations were becoming more powerful than governments and that was damaging to our democracies. But to be honest with you, while the good times rolled, taking on an economic system based on greed was a tough sell, at least in rich countries.

Ten years later, it seems as if there aren’t any more rich countries. Just a whole lot of rich people. People who got rich looting the public wealth and exhausting natural resources around the world.

The point is, today everyone can see that the system is deeply unjust and careening out of control. Unfettered greed has trashed the global economy. And it is trashing the natural world as well. We are overfishing our oceans, polluting our water with fracking and deepwater drilling, turning to the dirtiest forms of energy on the planet, like the Alberta tar sands. And the atmosphere cannot absorb the amount of carbon we are putting into it, creating dangerous warming. The new normal is serial disasters: economic and ecological.

These are the facts on the ground. They are so blatant, so obvious, that it is a lot easier to connect with the public than it was in 1999, and to build the movement quickly.

We all know, or at least sense, that the world is upside down: we act as if there is no end to what is actually finite—fossil fuels and the atmospheric space to absorb their emissions. And we act as if there are strict and immovable limits to what is actually bountiful—the financial resources to build the kind of society we need.

The task of our time is to turn this around: to challenge this false scarcity. To insist that we can afford to build a decent, inclusive society—while at the same time, respect the real limits to what the earth can take.

What climate change means is that we have to do this on a deadline. This time our movement cannot get distracted, divided, burned out or swept away by events. This time we have to succeed. And I’m not talking about regulating the banks and increasing taxes on the rich, though that’s important.

I am talking about changing the underlying values that govern our society. That is hard to fit into a single media-friendly demand, and it’s also hard to figure out how to do it. But it is no less urgent for being difficult.

That is what I see happening in this square. In the way you are feeding each other, keeping each other warm, sharing information freely and proving health care, meditation classes and empowerment training. My favorite sign here says, “I care about you.” In a culture that trains people to avoid each other’s gaze, to say, “Let them die,” that is a deeply radical statement.

A few final thoughts. In this great struggle, here are some things that don’t matter.

§ What we wear.

§ Whether we shake our fists or make peace signs.

§ Whether we can fit our dreams for a better world into a media soundbite.

And here are a few things that do matter.

§ Our courage.

§ Our moral compass.

§ How we treat each other.

We have picked a fight with the most powerful economic and political forces on the planet. That’s frightening. And as this movement grows from strength to strength, it will get more frightening. Always be aware that there will be a temptation to shift to smaller targets—like, say, the person sitting next to you at this meeting. After all, that is a battle that’s easier to win.

Don’t give in to the temptation. I’m not saying don’t call each other on shit. But this time, let’s treat each other as if we plan to work side by side in struggle for many, many years to come. Because the task before will demand nothing less.

Let’s treat this beautiful movement as if it is most important thing in the world. Because it is. It really is.