

LESSONS FROM OCCUPY WALL STREET FOR TODAY

Catch OWS activist-organiser Marisa Holmes at one of these free events

OCCUPY! – *All Day, All Week* film and talk. NY filmmaker and author **Marisa Holmes**
Q&A facilitated by **Holly Hammond** (The Commons Library) Host: NIBS
6 pm Thursday 27 June | Balit-mil Room | Victorian Trades Hall, **Carlton**

OCCUPY! NY filmmaker and author **Marisa Holmes** in conversation with **Cam Walker**
Friends of the Earth Campaigns Co-ordinator Host: Castlemaine Free University and DCV
6 pm Friday 28 June | Northern Arts Hotel 359 Barker St **Castlemaine**

OCCUPY! – NY filmmaker and author **Marisa Holmes** in conversation with activist
historian **Iain McIntyre**. Hosts Black Spark & The Commons Social Change Library
3 pm Sunday 30 June | Black Spark Cultural Centre | **Northcote**

An extract from the Conclusion to Marisa Holmes *Organizing Occupy Wall Street: This is Just Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) follows.



Lessons Learned

Horizontal, autonomous, and directly democratic practices were shared across contexts, and made the 2011 movements happen. People had a voice, many for the first time in their lives. The energy and excitement of this was palpable and made new worlds possible.

Unfortunately, the squares and OWS were met with many internal and external challenges and they could not address them all effectively. This brings us to a contemporary aim – building more intentional, intersectional, accountable, equitable, and resilient movements.

Setting Intentions

There was not strong enough organization in OWS or the squares over the long run. Being in public and open to new people meant exposing ourselves to many different experiences and understandings of the world. At the beginning this was essential and helped fuel our growth.

However, not everyone who came through the squares or other organizing spaces understood why these practices were important. They were gaining some hands-on experiences, and were becoming highly skilled, but lacked a sense of movement history or ideological cohesion. Without a consistent commitment to political education and collective defense of principles, it was much easier for other political tendencies, with hierarchical practices, to swoop in, and take control. Future movements must be prepared to move from the initial moment of growth into a more sustained horizontal, autonomous, and democratic organization.

Working at the Intersections

Race, gender, class, and ability were not central enough to our work. They should have been baked into the work from the very beginning. Learning from this, future movements must start with an intersectional analysis, and practice. This would include centering those who are oppressed in decision-making, action-planning, and more public facing visible roles. It would mean listening to those who are oppressed and taking their concerns seriously. Most of all, this would mean acknowledging that while the new world is being built, we tend to replicate patterns of the old one. None of us are immune from doing things that are harmful. There is also no immediate answer or way to fix systems and structures that are so ingrained without struggle. Undoing racism, undoing sexism, undoing classism, and undoing ableism, will be a constant process of abolishing what is, and creating what we want.

Being Accountable

There was not enough emphasis on harm reduction or addressing conflict. We all went in a bit blind to the many possible ways that people could get hurt. There was the naive belief that everyone who participated would be well-intentioned, and there for all the right reasons. Most people were, but it doesn't take many – only a handful really – to totally derail the work of building relationships. Future movements must have processes of accountability for all instances of harm and conflict. There must be shared expectations of all those involved to be accountable to others, and share in the work of doing accountability. There must be consequences when people refuse to be accountable and perpetuate harmful behavior. Excluding some people, so that other people can keep participating, must be an option.

Distributing Resources

It is essential to think carefully about who has access to resources, when, where, and why. Much like the current society, resources become sites of informal and formal concentrations of power-over others. These could include financial, cultural, social, or other resources. Given the reliance on social media in the squares and OWS, the accounts were resources. I hope that future movements take the use of social media very seriously, and how it can facilitate both horizontal and hierarchical structures. A movement is not a marketing campaign. It cannot be reduced to brands, memes, and hashtags. It is not about individual celebrities or fundraising. It is about our relationships.

Becoming Resilient

Going about making a social revolution, inevitably put us at odds with the forces of institutions, political parties, the state, and counter-revolutionary movements. It is an essential step to come to terms with this fact. If there is no conflict with opposing political forces, then there is no struggle. The question really is when and where to draw a line between one's friends and enemies. After establishing this, the follow-up question is how to be participatory and open enough to new people, while protecting a project against attacks. There is no easy answer here that works in all cases. There may be different strategies and tactics given the context. Overall, though, the goal must be to minimize the influence of those seeking to institutionalize, co-opt, repress, or re-direct for the counter-revolution. At the same time, there must be increasing influence of those seeking a horizontal, autonomous, and democratic revolution.

Facing our enemies was very physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausting during the squares. To guard against this in the future there is a need for pacing and taking things slow when needed. There must be a conscious effort to build capacity with regular people who are sympathetic, but not professional organizers. There must be a holistic way of approaching the work and integrating healing practices. We must build a culture of care if we are to outlive fascism.

Occupy Everywhere

Wherever there are people who insist on acting as if they're already free, the spirit of OWS is present. OWS lives in occupations of public space, and squats. It lives in rank and file independent labor actions such as work stoppages, strikes, and sabotage. It lives in direct actions during pipeline campaigns to protect water. It lives in the refusal to pay all unjust debts, whether student, medical, housing, or personal credit debts. It lives in prisoners struggling inside, and supporters outside. It lives in immigrants and refugees breaking down borders. It lives in actions against police murders, abolition, and black liberation. It lives in indigenous struggles to defend and reclaim land. It lives in those reclaiming Pride from corporations and police. It lives in LGBTQI+ liberation. It lives in feminists challenging all concentrations of dominate power, like the Supreme Court of the United States. It lives in disabled bodies asserting autonomy and fighting for healthcare. It lives in neuro-divergent folks fighting for mental health support. It lives, perhaps most of all, in the ever-expanding networks of mutual aid, providing material assistance and care to one another. OWS lives on, if not always in name, in practice.

The question now, is how to weave together all these struggles. How can we emulate what was effective from OWS and the squares? How can we overcome all the challenges we faced? What began in 2011, and at OWS, is still possible, now, in the present. Let's stop thinking of the world as it is and imagine what it could be. Then, we can really occupy everywhere.