Transcript

Upstream Podcast
Ep 12: Occupy Wall Street

Featured Guests:

Chris Hedges – Journalist and author of many books, including *Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt,* and most recently, *America: The Farewell Tour*
Ethan Earle – Paris-based political consultant who has written extensively about Occupy Wall Street
Stephanie Luce – Professor of labor studies at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies and also a professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center
Ruth Milkman – Professor at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City
Nathan Schneider – Professor of media studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder and author of *Everything for Everyone: The Radical Tradition that Is Shaping the Next Economy*
Tamara Shapiro – NYC activist and facilitator, a co-founder of Movement Netlab, and currently the Program Director at the NYC Network of Worker Cooperatives
Esteban Kelly – Executive Director of the U.S. Federation of Worker Co-ops

Della Duncan: This episode of Upstream was produced as part of a collective of podcasts brought together to explore the legacy of Occupy Wall Street, in light of the 10 year anniversary. Through this project you can also hear analysis on the impact of Occupy from shows like The Dig, Economic Update, and Belabored — all podcasts that we would highly recommend checking out. The producing partners for this project are the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's New York office and The New School's Milano program. You can learn more and listen to some of the other episodes by visiting RosaLux, that's rosalux.nyc/Occupy.

Before we get started on the episode, please, if you can, go to Apple Podcasts and rate, subscribe and leave us a review there — it really helps us get in front of more eyes and into more ears. We don't really have a marketing budget, or anything like that, for Upstream, so we really do rely on listeners like you to help grow our audience and spread the word.

And, as always, please visit upstreampodcast.org/support to support us with a recurring monthly or one-time donation. — it helps keep this podcast free and sustainable. So please do that, if you can. Thank you. And now on with the show…

[Intro music: Lanterns – Hearth and Harvest]

[River sounds]

Men's and Women's voices: You are listening to Upstream.

Della Duncan: A podcast of documentaries and conversations that invites you to unlearn everything you thought you knew about economics. I'm Della Duncan.

Robert Raymond: And I'm Robert Raymond.

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[Music: Do Make Say Think – The Landlord Is Dead]

[News Montage]

[Protest chants]

News Anchor: On Saturday, thousands of protestors took to the streets of downtown Manhattan, for what was described as an action to occupy Wall Street.

News Anchor: Since Saturday, Sept. 17th, thousands inspired by popular uprisings from Spain to the Arab Spring, gathered near Wall Street to decry corporate greed...

News Anchor: In New York, protestors are continuing to camp out in the park in the financial district as part of an action called "Occupy Wall Street."

David Graeber: A bunch of us showed up, relatively unprepared for what to expect on August 2nd, when they called a general meeting, and after a little bit of uncertainty, we sort of started putting together a process. We decided to model it in the idea of sort of a horizontal, direct democracy they had in Europe. And in a way, the Wall Street action was one focus, but the very idea of building that general assembly movement was a lot of what we were really about...

News Anchor: It's day ten of the Occupy Wall Street campaign, on Saturday more than eighty protestors were arrested as hundreds took part in yet another march to Wall Street...

Chris Hedges: There is no way to vote against the interests of Goldman Sachs, and so when you shut that safety valve off, you create movements that seek to tear down a monolithic and tonedeaf and callous power structure — and that's precisely what's happened.

News Anchor: Hear in New York, the city's powerful unions are set to join the Occupy Wall Street demonstration now entering its twentieth day. Their march to City Hall will be bolstered by the walkout of hundreds, potentially thousands, of students at major public universities in New York City, where tuition rates are on the rise…

Cornell West: The makings of a U.S. Autumn, responding to the Arab Spring, and its growing and growing. I hope it spills over to San Francisco and Chicago and Miami and Phoenix, Arizona, with our Brown brothers and sisters, hits our poor white brothers and sisters in Appalachia, so it begins to coalesce…

News Anchor: The Occupy Wall Street protest entered its third week today. What started as less than a dozen college students camping out in the park near the New York Stock Exchange is now hundreds of protestors — and it's spread to other cities.

Michael Moore: This is literally an uprising of people who've had it. And it has already started to spread across the country and other cities, it will continue to spread. It has to start somewhere, it started here, with a few hundred, it will grow and really already has grown here to a few thousand, and will be tens of thousands, and then hundreds of thousands of people…

News Anchor: Nearly two months into Occupy Wall Street, New York City police have carried out a major crackdown on protestors' Lower Manhattan encampment. Police officers in riot gear encircled Zuccotti Park...

News Anchor: Police in New York have evicted protestors with the Occupy Wall Street movement, from the park in the city's financial district, where they've been camped since September…

Ruth Milkman: So even though the occupations themselves went away, the spirit of Occupy lives on to this day.

[Music: Will Stratton – Tokens]

Della Duncan: It's pretty crazy to think that it's been a decade since September 2011, but, at the same time, it also feels like forever ago. So much has changed since Occupy, but, sadly, a lot remains the same. And actually, if you're looking at wealth inequality and the power of the financial sector — things might even be worse.

But no matter what your thoughts are on the Occupy movement, it's impossible to deny its sweeping impact, not just on the left, but much more broadly too. You may have heard folks say that Occupy Wall Street was a failure — and if you're talking about how the movement failed to, say, overthrow capitalism and usher in a new era of eco-socialism devoid of subprime loans and hedge fund managers, then yes, sure, Occupy definitely didn't accomplish that. But to say the movement was a failure is to overlook so, so much. And that's what we want to talk about in this episode: the things that Occupy gave us. The networks that were built, the ideas that were shaped around democracy — not just the electoral form of democracy that's confined to the ballot box, but real, direct democracy — the space that was created to exercise the muscles of solidarity and cooperativism, mutual aid and political organizing, as well as the shifts in public discourse…in the next hour, we'll look at how the chaotic, fervent explosion that was Occupy Wall Street manifested *[pause for effect]* from the moments after the encampments were cleared to *today* — ten years later.

Chris Hedges: Occupy, look at Occupy as a tactic, not an end in itself. As a tactic, it was extremely successful. It raised national consciousness. It gave us a new vocabulary by which to speak about the largest transference of wealth upwards in American history. It focused the attention on the real centers of power, which is Wall Street, the big banks and corporations. If you look at Occupy as a tactic rather than an end in itself, then it's not a failure.

Della Duncan: Chris Hedges is a journalist and author. He was very active in Occupy, taking part in the encampment's Direct Action Committee, planning and participating in the People's Hearing, which was a mock trial for Goldman Sachs, and even getting arrested.

Chris Hedges: It did create this network, this solidarity, these friendships, these connections that then played out in a variety of protest movements since Occupy — Black Lives Matter, the anti-fracking movement, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel. It splintered out in many directions. The effort to unionize and raise the wages of fast food workers, many of those organizers came out of Occupy. So it provided a kind of experience, a kind of community and I think that without seeing the name of Occupy, you can see the effects of Occupy in numerous resistance movements throughout the country.

And then the structures of Occupy — I'm not an organizer, So, watching how they created non-hierarchical structures, how they created the people's assembly, how they prioritized voices that traditionally are shunted aside or marginalized — this was all amazing to me. And just the organizational skill, people don't often understand the high level of organization it took to maintain Zuccotti. Because remember, they were feeding people, they had a medical tent, at the same time they were trying to do activism on the streets. I mean, it was very inspiring on all of those levels.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie – Divider]

Della Duncan: Occupy Wall Street emerged during an incredibly dark period in U.S. history. The *hope and change* that was promised during Obama's presidential campaign turned out to be a false promise. Wall Street was held largely unaccountable after the financial collapse of 2008, and in fact, the banks whose greed and recklessness led to the collapse were actually *bailed out*. The bubble had burst — and everyday people were left to clean up the mess on their own. Of course, this is an old story at this point. And, when you really think back to how messed up things were back then, it's really not surprising to think about how quickly Occupy grew and how much it resonated.

Ethan Earle: I think that Occupy Wall Street was part of a wave of protests that mark, broadly speaking, a certain moment in human history and in the history of capitalism.

Della Duncan: Ethan Earle is a Paris-based political consultant who has written extensively about Occupy Wall Street. At the time of Occupy, he was the U.S. Director of The Working World, a non-profit that provides investment capital and technical support for worker cooperatives.

Ethan Earle: Gramsci has written very eloquently about the interregnum — when the old has died and the new is still struggling to be born. And I think that it's clear that the 2010s, and I would say up to the present, constituted a form of interregnum and that the neoliberal order had become increasingly a zombie ideology that nobody even really believed, but it just kept walking on.

Della Duncan: When you think back to the beginning of the millennium — and even the decade before it — it was a pretty subdued time — things were dormant. Of course, it's not that things were going great, but for whatever reason, there were just no popular movements, nothing to plug into. There was a brief period of protest around the time of the war in Iraq, but that didn't really last. It wasn't until Occupy, during the twenty-tens, or the teens, or whatever we want to call them, that things really began to get stirred up.

Ethan Earle: It was a sudden explosion of all sorts of different things at once, the vast majority of which could be described as sitting somewhere on the progressive left side of the spectrum, but which encompassed all sorts of more horizontal, vertical, traditional, innovative approaches, ways of doing left politics, ways of existing in this world in this phase of whatever phase of late capitalism we might be in.

There is occasionally what I would characterize as a misreading, oftentimes in good faith, and sometimes in bad faith, that Occupy Wall Street was some sort of failed social movement because it did not achieve tangible reforms, but there's a fundamental mischaracterization there, which is that Occupy Wall Street was not a reform-based social movement with a specific constituency and a specific sort of defined set of reform-oriented goals. And these are incredibly important in history, these sorts of social movements, right? And I think that Occupy Wall Street was a much more of a revolutionary moment in the way that it changed people's ways of thinking, ways of relating, ways of understanding their own agency, their own ability to occupy a space in downtown Manhattan and get radical left ideas onto the front page of The New York Times or New York Post, even if it was to disparage them and to denigrate them. And this sit-in, this encampment of people who are really protesting against a wide array of the what we're sort of viewed as the excesses and perversions of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, somehow sort of sparked a fire, lit a match that that caught on very, very quickly across the country and across the world.

[Protestors chanting: we are the 99 percent]

Stephanie Luce: My name is Stephanie Luce. I'm a professor of labor studies at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies and also a professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center. My own personal connection to Occupy Wall Street was that I would say in the summer leading up to it — we had a number of our students had been involved in some of the precursor activities, such as Bloomberg bill, that took place that spring. And we were hearing a lot of talk about that, this proposal for Occupy Wall Street — I'd been involved in a number of things in New York, but I didn't really pay it a lot of attention. I didn't have a lot of optimism about it really having any success. But within the first week, I went down to Occupy and kind of got sucked in. It seemed clearly that it was something very different and important. So I got involved, just on a personal level, I was finding myself there almost every day and engaging in some of the work, particularly through the Labor Working Group. And then later on, I got involved with my colleagues, with doing a study of Occupy and interviewing some of the key activists.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie – Out of the Skies, Under the Earth]

Della Duncan: The labor working group that Stephanie participated in was just one of over seventy different working groups and affinity groups that were open to the public as part of the Occupy decision-making body. The meetings used a horizontal governance model and allowed for participants to comment on committee proposals using a process called a "stack," which is a queue of speakers that anyone could join.

In addition to participating directly in Occupy, Stephanie co-authored a report titled, *Changing the Subject: A Bottom-up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City*, in which she and her colleagues interviewed 25 core Occupy activists and surveyed 729 people who participated in an Occupy-sponsored rally and march. Some of the questions they asked included: Where did Occupy come from? Who were the protesters? What motivated them to join this new movement? And why did the occupations gain such enormous traction with the media and the wider public? A decade later, Stephanie and her colleagues are working on a follow-up report, and have interviewed almost all of the original 25 activists again. We asked her what her thoughts are on the legacy of Occupy Wall Street ten years later...

Stephanie Luce: I think one is this idea of shifting the discourse. Because before that time, kind of the right wing analysis of the global recession was that, you know, oh, poor people bought houses that they couldn't afford or that unionized workers were too greedy and getting pensions from the public dole, for example. And so I think what Occupy did was to really help change that narrative and to say, hey, look, it was the one percent that was responsible for that crisis and the one percent that's been responsible for the ongoing crisis before 2008 that's been going on for decades. The one percent has been taking all the riches of our society and blaming the 99 percent. I think that shift has fueled a large segment of the population in the U.S. and globally, to really highlight this inequality in resources and in power.

Ruth Milkman: The actual occupation of Zuccotti Park and the other spaces around the United States and the world that people occupied didn't last very long. That's true.

Della Duncan: Ruth Milkman is a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City. She co-authored the *Changing the Subject* report with Stephanie, along with their colleague Penelope Lewis.

Ruth Milkman: But what did last was the change in public conversation and especially around the issue of inequality. People like myself, social scientists, sociologists, historians, and all, we're very well aware that the amount of economic inequality that existed in 2011 — still exists, by the way — and the explosive growth of inequality in the previous decades.

That was well known to experts on such topics, but it was not well known to the general public. I mean, they might have felt it, experienced it in some way, but, you know, the sort of we are the 99 percent slogan really got traction as people called public attention to the fact that a relatively small group of people were getting most of the benefits of what economic growth had occurred in recent decades. And we documented this in our report, that media mentions of the word inequality went up quite dramatically after 2011, after Occupy, and stayed up compared to before. So that was one really important thing, that it just completely transformed the public political conversation about economic issues and especially growing inequality.

And it also empowered that generation politically. The occupiers, that I know of anyway, included at least two distinct groups: one was a group of longtime activists and organizers who had participated in many other protests over the years,

and, you know, of various ages and so on, and, you know, they didn't particularly see this one as special in advance of it. They didn't think that it would last so much longer or get so much more attention than other protests they'd been involved in. But then it did, and that was extremely empowering and made people feel that they really could have an impact on the world. And so many of them would go on to bigger and better things thereafter. So that was another impact.

And then the other group were sort of the newbies, young people who were drawn to this protest, especially as it was amplified, its visibility got greater and greater over time, but hadn't been activists before and were transformed into activists as a result of their participation and began to see the possibilities for social change that emerged. So it was the beginning of a whole new wave of social movement activity in this country.

So I think it was a watershed moment that kind of opened the floodgates to a new wave of social protest led by a new generation that had, you know, most of whose members had not been particularly active politically prior to 2011. So even though the occupations themselves went away, the spirit of Occupy lives on to this day and has manifested itself both in the public conversation and in other movements that have followed.

[Music: Taylor Deupree]

Ethan Earle: We can't understand a lot of what happened over the last decade without recognizing the role that Occupy Wall Street played in that. And I think here of the Movement for Black Lives, which gained enormous visibility shortly thereafter, I think of the first Bernie Sanders election that caught everybody off guard. I think of the subsequent election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as well as other outspoken socialists to U.S. Congress, of the enormous rise of DSA, the Democratic Socialist of America, which went from having being a small, tired old Democratic Socialist Party of a few thousand members to having nearly 100,000 members and hundreds of elected officials. I think of the #metoo movement as well, I think about a partial rebirth of labor activism through which we've seen a real strike wave, for example, in the education sector over the last year, year and a half. I could go on speaking about climate justice and other areas. And I think that we can see direct lineages. First of all, people who were involved in Occupy Wall Street. Right. And then who who learned and got into left politics there believed that change was possible in a way that they perhaps did not before, and then took

that in any number of different [00:15:45] directions right into to work on racial justice, climate justice, housing justice, electoral campaigns, you know, a massive growth in Worker Cooperatives as well over the last decade, so

It was a space where you could find yourself and try to understand what you believe to be the way to make change happen and find others who thought like yourself. So I think that it's — after a decade and in some ways, a generation of a very subaltern left, which was not able to find its footing to find an expansive space in the public imaginary, in the public discourse, in the political or policy sphere, Occupy Wall Street sort of exploded that, and then we saw the shards of it everywhere.

[Glass shards explosion and chanting]

Nathan Schneider: I first encountered it in August of 2011 in Tompkins Square Park in New York City under the Hari Krishna tree, the tree where the Hari Krishna movement was founded. And there were maybe about somewhere 60 to 100 people gathered around this tree. And it ~~was~~ turned out to be maybe the third, depending on how you count, official meeting about this idea in New York City.

Della Duncan: Nathan Schneider is currently a professor of media studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. But ten years ago, during Occupy, he was a reporter living in New York.

Nathan Schneider: This was a response in turn to a call [00:04:00] earlier in the summer made in Adbusters magazine, a centerfold of — I have the physical thing right here…

Della Duncan: As we were talking over our remote audio and video recording app, Nathan held up the Adbusters centerfold…

[Music: Chris Zabriskie – John Stockton Slow Drag]

Della Duncan: ...a moody, black and white image of a ballerina in an attitude arabesque pose, arms delicately outstretched, one leg up, posing on top of the famous Bull of Wall Street sculpture in Manhattan's Financial District. The backdrop of the image is a shroud of what appears to be tear gas, through which you can partially make out figures in gas masks. One appears to be holding a club.

At the very top of the centerfold, the question: “What is our one demand?” is written in red font. At the bottom, it just says: #occupywallstreet. September 17th. Bring tent.

Nathan Schneider: That, in turn, was an outgrowth of a blog post that Adbusters had done in January or February of that year, noticing what was happening in Tunisia and Egypt and saying, you know, can we bring Tahrir to the United States? Right, so this was a year of uprisings — Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan. Morocco, Libya, all over the Middle East, then into Europe, Greece, Spain, France.

So they kind of used the Adbusters call as a galvanizing point, but it was a convergence of much more that was already underway. And so when this fairly small group of people did, in fact, go to Wall Street on September 17th, it was about a thousand people. A few hundred ended up spending the night at a park called Zuccotti Park nearby, this kind of public-private space, hard stone ground. And it took a few days for this to get any attention at all. In many ways, at first, it felt like a disappointment for a lot of people involved. And but then, midway through that week, as they stayed, they had more and more encounters with police. And the documentation of that, the videos, the images started to spread. And by the end of the week, there was a protest where there was more intense kind of police attack, and that really, really spread, drew more people in. By October 1st, Occupy Wall Street was in headlines all over the world and there were Occupy camps in cities across the United States and around the world.

Della Duncan: There are way too many to list comprehensively, but every single state in the country had at least one city with an occupy protest or demonstration. There were sixty cities and towns in California *alone*. And outside the United States? At least 951 cities in 82 countries, stretching from Cairo to Quito, Mexico City to Munich, Sydney to Stockholm.

Nathan Schneider: Occupy was of a moment where it felt like this generation was craving democracy. There was this insatiable desire for it. And it was this visceral thing. And it was something people were commenting about. It was all over these movements. There was this demand in 2011, we want deeper democracy, richer democracy in our everyday lives. The inability of the systems around us to give an inch — to enter into that dance and that exploration — okay, let's try something new. Let's explore, let's enter into a new kind of forms of participation and engagement and decision-making. Let's open up the canvas. That didn't happen.

And I think a result is that, you know, across the political spectrums, around the world, you know, all sorts of places from now Afghanistan to the American heartland, you see this deep distrust of democratic institutions that claim to be democratic and have really failed to live up to the democratic aspirations that the people within them feel. And so you can look at that on a macro political, economic scale — the sense in which people aren't being provided for in these fundamental ways. Systems are failing them in very large scales.

But there's also this like local sense, that sense of democracy that the populists in the late 19th century really understood, which was that you build a national politics on the basis of everyday experience and if you want to build a democratic movement, you need to create spaces in which people can be democratic in their daily lives and feel that power and extend that power, knowledge and practice into into ever larger scales. And Occupy still sticks with me as that demand, that beautiful demand, sense of possibility, a sense of hope that actually, you know, we are capable of deeper democracy than we've experienced before. And we want to enter into that.

Della Duncan: Nathan saw this happening in real time inside of the Occupy encampments.

Nathan Schneider: My method as a reporter was to, you know, show up early when no one else cared and stay late after everyone else was gone. And one of the things that I saw people doing when I stayed late was starting to turn into a new economy movement. The kind of culture of the occupation was this kind of like unquenchable craving for democracy in every part of life. People were always trying to figure out how can we be more radically democratic in every moment, in how we lead our protest and in how we make a decision and how we deal with bathrooms and, you know, all kinds of basic necessities. And so it was kind of natural that as the protest spaces were lost and people had to figure out their way into the economy again, they started rediscovering the cooperative movement.

And I started reporting on that as I was trying to figure out where is all this energy leading? So there were efforts, for instance, to set up worker cooperatives in New York City, in the Rockaways, a region that was really hard hit by Hurricane Sandy, some of those people were involved in really building out the New York City Network for Worker Cooperatives, which is still kind of anchor organization there. And around the country, this kind of question of can we do economic democracy? Can we practice the values that we were exploring in the occupation in our economic lives. So, for instance, a group set up a worker co-op called OccuCopy to

make flyers for the movement, basically a copy shop. It's now called Radix Media — it's a Worker Cooperative. And that was the natural way to build business in the context of a community trying to be democratic in every possible way.

And I fell victim to that. You know, I kind of combined that impulse with the anxieties about these technologies that this movement had been so much built on — the new social media, you know, corporate driven tools and the emerging gig economy. And so within a few years, I was in a position of helping to build this movement called Platform Cooperativism. In no way did we claim the mantle of Occupy, but I wouldn't have been there without that Occupy experience and the people who I was encountering there. And I was in no way alone. You know, many of the people who I've gotten to know in the kind of new wave of the cooperative movement were kind of formed in decisive ways in the context of Occupy.

Ethan Earle: So really, for me as well, it was an enormous opportunity to not just to sharpen my ideas, which Occupy Wall Street was a fantastic place for that. With these rich discussions taking place around the role of worker cooperatives and other forms of democratic ownership in large scale economies, right? But it was also a place to find people who were looking — who were interested in worker cooperatives themselves, who already perhaps were in worker cooperatives, who were who had been part of the worker cooperative movement, like with many other movements, it had been, remained, very dormant and subaltern.

Again, we'd had this huge gap in the United States, the period where there was sort of no visible left and worker cooperatives and its movement had sort of subsided and the public imaginary and visibility like everything else said during that period. So it was like people coming out from all different places, again, with all sorts of different ideas and interest, but many of those being in worker cooperatives. So it was a place where we were meeting people who wanted to build worker cooperatives and figuring out how we could help them to do that. It was a place where we were supporting worker cooperatives that were supporting Occupy Wall Street itself, such as OccuCopy. And it was a place where I was learning from people who had decades of experience in some cases.

[Music: Karl Blau – Fallin' Rain]

Esteban Kelly: So many people who I work with nowadays reveal to me that they came into awareness of cooperatives and the solidarity economy through Occupy

Wall Street or various occupations, places like Boston or wherever and that it was like completely not on their radar.

Della Duncan: Esteban Kelly is the Executive Director of the U.S. Federation of Worker Co-ops, a national grassroots membership organization for cooperatives.

Esteban Kelly: For me, I had become aware of that just through a different cultural moment around sort of 90s punk anarchist movements and ways in which that was an echo of political organization in the UK and in response to Thatcherism and its analogue in the U.S. with with Reagan and the neocons here.

As a teenager listening to punk music and going through the lyrics of bands and being in anarchist reading groups and things like that, I was like, well, of course, you know, before I'd ever encountered cooperatives or begun organizing them or affiliated as a member of different kinds of co-ops, I had heard about them through a lot of that literature around what it looks like to have community control, to have agency and direct deliberative, whatever democracy, stewardship over the kinds of, you know, mutualistic institutions at the the smallest level.

But whatever your road is to, they're actually arriving at that place and being like, Oh, we do have this critique of how our economy is structured, how power flows in that way to reproduce those inequities economically. And so, you know, I had a sense of cooperatives and the solidarity economy. And then I got plugged into them because it was already — I was sort of on the lookout for opportunities to engage in these sort of structures, these mutualist projects. And that's just a very different path than I think what a later generation of cooperative organizers who many of whom are my colleagues nowadays and are leaders nowadays, we're, you know, ten years out from Occupy Wall Street, and these are folks who only first heard about them through encounters in the occupations themselves.

So, yeah, I do attribute a lot of the audience and interest and supporters that we have now, I think especially around worker cooperatives, to the sort of legacy, the aftermath of what came when Occupy Wall Street started to ebb a little bit, but the deeper analysis and self-education that people took on, that that continued to shape people who really I think it started with this sort of rhetorical idea, you know, yeah, another world is possible. We were doing that all the way through the anti-war stuff. But really to say if that's true, if it's true that another world is possible, then, what is it that we can do to help to bring about that world?

People went from another world is possible, to some education about what that might look like, learning a little bit about cooperatives and then immediately they were able to see or Google or visit, Oh, these are enterprises that exist right now, like in my borough in New York, or in my city, whichever Occupy chapter or whatever you were participating in, to be able to see an actual project and be like, Oh, it's not just that theoretically workers can be the ~~sort of~~ owners of the means of production. Here are 10 businesses in my backyard that exemplify that. Let me find out more about them. Let me talk to those workers themselves, hear what that's like. What was their journey? And more importantly, let's get busy building some of these cooperative projects and businesses, or at least joining the movement and seeing how we can contribute to the work that's already underway.

So yeah, I think the impact all the way up to people who are currently on my board, people who have founded new organizations that do [00:15:00] cooperative business development or technical assistance or financing, non-extractive loan funds and things like that — so many of them were turned onto that from Occupy.

[Protestors chanting: this is what democracy looks like]

Tammy Shapiro: I knew two people who were involved, and that was it. I really didn't know anyone else who was involved in a deep way.

Della Duncan: Tammy Shapiro is a New York City activist and facilitator, co-founder of Movement Netlab, and currently the Program Director of the NYC Network of Worker Cooperatives.

Tammy Shapiro: They basically got me involved in two different working groups. One was the Movement Building Working Group and the other one was planning a big action on October 15th and that meeting had people across working groups in from Occupy Wall Street. So basically, what that ended up doing was situating me between a cross-section of folks in New York City and coordinating InterOccupy, which was connecting people nationally across the country. And that was the role that I kind of maintained for most of Occupy Wall Street.

Della Duncan: Tammy had been an organizer for almost a decade before she got involved with Occupy — experience that put her in an ideal position to help create an online organizing platform and communication channel for Occupy and its many working groups.

Tammy Shapiro: And so our first call was bringing people together. And we basically — we were in an office building in a few blocks from the park and there were a lot of people there, actually, and there were about a hundred people on the call. And we asked, did people want to connect nationally and what do they want to connect about and who'd wanted to help make this happen? And so we asked who wanted to help coordinate this effort and people raised their hands from Philadelphia, from L.A., from Michigan, from Seattle. And that first call, those people we met on the first call, we pulled together into a meeting and that became InterOccupy.

[Music: Chris Zabriskie – Divider]

Della Duncan: InterOccupy played a crucial role in connecting the various occupations around the country during the period of the Occupy encampments and actions, helping the different areas of the country share tactics, strategies, and simply just providing a sense of connection and solidarity.But, unlike the encampments themselves, InterOccupy, and the networks and connections it fostered, didn't end when Zuccati was cleared out by the police. They emerged again a year after the evictions, when Superstorm Sandy made landfall in New York.

[Hurricane Sandy News Montage]

Della Duncan: Superstorm Sandy devastated New York City, causing massive flooding and power outages — which in some cases lasted for weeks. The official disaster relief response was woefully inadequate in many ways — especially in hard-hit areas like the Rockaways, a narrow peninsula lying along the coast south of Brooklyn. The glaring gap that was left by official authorities, however, was quickly filled by a grassroots network of activists and volunteers. And because this spontaneous, community-led relief effort was supported in large part by the already existing networks formed during Occupy Wall Street a year earlier, it became known as Occupy Sandy.

[Fade out music]

Tammy Shapiro: So the story of how Occupy Sandy started, I think, is actually really fascinating, much like the InterOccupy story. It was right after the one year

anniversary of Occupy Wall Street, and some of us went away on a retreat and the goal of the retreat was to really debrief the year. What had we done well? What would we do differently the next time a movement moment happened, whenever that may be? And we spent a weekend upstate. It was beautiful. It was fun. We had some really, really great discussions. And at the end, we all rushed home because we heard there was a storm coming. We didn't talk about organizing in the storm, we just knew we had to get back. So we all rushed home and the actual storm happened. I, luckily, was not really impacted. You know, some branches fell on my block, but that was it. But the day after the storm, someone I had driven to the retreat showed up at my house because his jacket was in my car. And so he showed up to get his jacket, and then he convinced me, actually much to my dismay, to drive him to a place in Red Hook that folks were starting to gather to help support people who'd been impacted.

Della Duncan: Red Hook is a neighborhood in northwestern Brooklyn that was hit particularly hard by Sandy.

Tammy Shapiro: And so I drove him there and then people were there talking about how we're going to start organizing. And there was a desire to figure out how do we get the word out about what we're doing, how do we hold the information? And because I was connected to InterOccupy and InterOccupy had built this whole website basically to do just this, I connected what was happening there to InterOccupy and that was basically how I got involved. And every step of the way from there was — what was happening, what became Occupy Sandy, you know, it was — there were a lot of efforts happening in different places, all at the same time, but most of us were connected because we had been involved in Occupy Wall Street. Everything that happened was built upon infrastructure that was created during Occupy Wall Street.

So the next day someone contacted me who I knew, he was Occupy Kitchen, so he cooked a lot of food for different meetings and events and things like that. And he said, I have some food in the Occupy Kitchen storage area, would that be useful? So I went to pick him up and we were heading towards Red Hook again, and we got word that there were too many people at Red Hook and we needed to go somewhere else. So we were in touch with someone from Occupy Faith who was a pastor at a church, and he said, Sure, you can come put your stuff down at this church. And so we got there and we started setting up shop and people from Red Hook started sending folks to us. And what ended up, you know, we were just going to leave our stuff for the night. We were there probably for a month or two

months as one of the main headquarters in Brooklyn, where we were distributing to the different areas that were impacted.

[Music: American Football – Never Meant]

Della Duncan: Dozens of different distribution hubs quickly popped up all over the city. People would drop off supplies at these hubs, and then other folks would deliver these supplies to wherever they were needed the most at any given time.

[pause]

It was a really sophisticated operation, with lots of moving parts, and it was all done in the spirit of Occupy, meaning that it was based on mutual aid, as opposed to charity, and it was done horizontally, without any of the hierarchy or cumbersome bureaucracy that often comes with official relief organizations, like the Red Cross. And finally, it was all done in a way that made sure the communities themselves were put front and center — there were no savior or victim dynamics. Occupy Sandy volunteers worked *with* the communities they were helping.

Tammy Shapiro: And so everything — the foundation of Occupy Sandy was built upon the foundation of Occupy Wall Street. We had a database set up — everyone during Occupy Wall Street, we had the moments in the park, but people kept working all year on creating infrastructure, on figuring out how to, you know — it's not like the movement ended when the park was raided, and I think it was precisely when the park was raided and we were no longer able to stay there, that things like InterOccupy became more important because they were the virtual spaces that were holding the movement. ~~And~~ so there were databases that we had been building so that we could do better intake and they were already built. So we were able to use that as we were bringing volunteers in.

Della Duncan: Occupy Sandy was comprised of nearly 60,000 volunteers and activists at its height, and developed its very own relief registry, a legal team, a medical team, a team of translators, a prescription drug delivery system, and a meal program serving around 20,000 meals a day. It’s still considered one of the most effective grassroots relief efforts in U.S. history. They kind of saved the city, which is pretty ironic when you think about how a lot of the folks volunteering had been brutalized and violently evicted from Zuccotti Park less than a year earlier.

Tammy Shapiro: You know, when you have a moment like Occupy Wall Street or Occupy Sandy, there's a latent network that gets created and you need the moments to massage the network, the moments that reminds everyone that the network is still there. And that's exactly what Occupy Sandy was. It was a moment where we had this network that had been created. It wasn't quite latent yet, but it also was kind of fizzling. And then we had a moment that reminded us that that network is there, that it's useful, that we actually have a lot of power.

Della Duncan: Power that didn't end with the disaster relief work. Efforts during Occupy Sandy, which were informed by Occupy Wall Street itself, in turn, inspired an explosion of organizing and economic democracy efforts over the months and years that followed — in the Rockaways, and beyond.

Tammy Shapiro: So during Occupy Wall Street, InterOccupy was trying to figure out what do we do next? So we were starting to talk about becoming a co-op and what would it mean to become a worker co-op? And in that process, we had connected to Brendan Martin from The Working World, which had recently moved from Argentina to New York City.

Della Duncan: The Working World, if you recall, is the organization that Ethan Earle, who we heard from earlier, was the Director of U.S. operations for during the time of Occupy. The Working World helps provide investment capital and technical support to worker cooperatives in the U.S. Brendan Martin, who Tammy met during Occupy Wall Street, is the organization's founder and lead director.

Tammy Shapiro: You know, a lot of people had lost their jobs and lost employment and folks were interested in co-ops. So because I knew Brendan from the Occupy Wall Street time, I brought him to a meeting with folks who were interested in co-ops from across the Occupy Sandy landscape. Occupy Sandy was connected to people in Rockaway, Staten Island, Coney Island, New Jersey. So we were connected in a lot of places and all those folks were showing — showed up to this meeting and we had a discussion about what would it look like to support people with co-ops, and we brainstormed a bunch of ideas.

The one that I worked on, which is actually the one that ended up happening, was in connection with Rockaway. So we started talking to the pastor of the church where we had a relief site and we said, Are you interested in this work? Because we knew that he was really concerned about employment for his congregation. And we knew that worker co-ops were useful for lots of different populations,

including immigrant populations, which were particularly a population that belonged to this church. And he was, so we started setting up basically worker co-op info sessions that turned into an academy.

And it was a partnership between The Working World, another individual who was involved in worker coops, and Occupy Sandy volunteers. And Occupy Sandy volunteers didn't know anything about worker co-ops and definitely nothing about business. But we were organizers and coordinators, so we were playing that role and The Working World folks were playing the role of, ~~you know,~~ worker co-op training and sort of supporting the Occupy Sandy organizers who were supporting the teams that were trying to start worker co-ops.

Della Duncan: The co-op academy that Tammy helped create was called Worker Owned Rockaway Cooperatives, or the WORCs program.

Tammy Shapiro: Through those relationships that we built doing this mutual aid work right after the storm, we were able to build a lot of trust because we were there, we showed up. They knew us. They saw our faces. And the WORCs program, I could see just how much hope and excitement there was in the room. The spaces were so energetic. I mean, when we first started doing these academies, we had food that was still being cooked by the Occupy Kitchen and delivered. We had volunteers who were doing childcare and we were doing it in English and Spanish, but without interpretation equipment. So we were doing everything in sight in consecutive interpretation, which meant we were in the small church full of people with kids running around, food, and then the whole evening was in English and then Spanish. And what that meant is that different communities in Rockaway who didn't normally actually interact were interacting through this worker co-ops space. So a very vibrant and energetic space. And it was a real honor to support it at the time.

[Music interlude]

Stephanie Luce: There was an element of the functioning of Occupy, like the experience of trying to have what you know, I'd say prefigurative politics — just to try and live in that park and function as direct democracy, to feed and provide healthcare and so forth.

Della Duncan: Here’s Stephanie Luce again.

Stephanie Luce: And I think there are a lot of lessons that were learned from that experience as well, good and bad, like the limitations of that, as well as like the beauty of what is possible. And I think some of those lessons have played out in subsequent mutual aid efforts, whether it was in Superstorm Sandy, whether it was during COVID and the pandemic. The people who practice mutual aid and rely on some of those strategies, you know, rely still on some of the lessons learned in Occupy. I mean, it had been going on before Occupy, too, but I think Occupy had an important intervention there. Whether you're talking about climate disaster, you know, pandemic, police brutality, the idea that to be already organized and have those networks in place is so crucial. You're not going to respond, you know, that well, if you don't have that in place. And I think Occupy really helped set some of that terrain here in New York City.

Della Duncan: As we mentioned earlier, Stephanie, along with her colleagues Ruth Milkman and Penelope Lewis, authored a report in which they interviewed 25 core Occupy activists just after Occupy ended. Now they're currently working on an updated report in which they have re-interviewed almost every single one of those original 25 individuals.

Stephanie Luce: Going back to them 10 years later, it is remarkable how consistently everyone is still deeply politically engaged. Now, that ranges a lot from people who are, for example, Sandy Nurse who just is running for city council in New York, people who are doing their political work full time as a job, labor organizers and so forth, to some who have their political work is done via other methods, through their music, through their teaching, through their research and writing, for example. But they all see themselves still pretty deeply engaged in the political struggle and political work. What's, yeah, been so interesting to me is just to see that there are different trajectories in terms of the way the activists have gone, in terms of their relationship to electoral politics or their relationship to direct action, their relationship to, you know, formal organization. But they all still see themselves as part of this general struggle, which is the struggle against the one percent.

Ethan Earle: There was a certain basis of protest against wealth inequality, income inequality, economic inequality. But it was very much also about racial justice, about climate justice. It was about anti-militarism. It was about housing justice, it was about labor movements, it was about mutual aid, it was about worker cooperatives, as I was mentioning before, economic democracy, you can go on and on and on. It was a place where people could find themselves and find ways to

express themselves and to experiment with ideas that, again, had previously been very subaltern in mainstream, let's say, American society. So suddenly, kids from Indiana who maybe had never had the opportunity to enter left political milieus to talk about Marx or whomever else, right, as well from a left intellectual historical tradition, were able to find themselves, find others who were like-minded in one way or another, and use these physical spaces really to experiment. So it was a massive surprise explosion of experimentation with all sorts of different left ideas.

Esteban Kelly: I think in the moment where Occupy was popping off — because we forget sometimes the narrative was building as the campaign was developing, and it's not like people went in with a framework of wealth inequality, the 99 percent, like, part of the function of the occupations was raising the awareness once people were there, right? So it was sort of like, Whoa, there's this — it's almost like a bonfire or something. It's like it attracts the humans who might be alienated for any number of reasons, which was another part of the elegance of Occupy. Regardless of your class background, age, like so many people found a reason to be in touch with their alienation and then through that to seek affinity with other people who were alienated and then they sort of connected in these occupations.

Nathan Schneider: I still see my, you know, social networks are totally populated by people from that. I mean, one thing that was really striking to me was, when I look at, you know, how Facebook tells you how many friends you have in common with somebody, normally I get a friend requests from somebody, it's like, okay, you have five, ten, fifteen friends in common. If it's somebody from Occupy, it's like you're 400 friends in common, right? The density of the network was just kind of a different order than ordinary life. And that inevitably produces, you know, connections, effects, consequences that, as every network is, are not linear, are emergent, are their own thing. Yet it's impossible to say that they weren't in some way connected to the density of that network that arose from packing a bunch of people deeply, deeply committed to doing something about the state of the world in one place — or in multiple places around the country, around the world, that, had this kind of isomorphism about them.

Esteban Kelly: Part of the lasting legacy of Occupy Wall Street is it reinserted a class consciousness, even if it wasn't explicitly so, that there's sort of a latent class consciousness that people — there's a new common sense understanding of how our economy is structured, of how it's not serving almost all of us, including people who are upper middle class, who are not part of the one percent, right? And that curiosity and that orientation, that curiosity of like, well, what's really going on

behind the scenes, has everything to do with how people are interpreting and navigating the world we live in now and how that then has helped to feed, not only to feed into particular movements that bring, for example, a racial analysis around the racial wealth gap and anti-Black racism, or the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis and how it really wiped out Black wealth that has not recuperated at the pace that white wealth has. But I think in a lot of ways, that class consciousness was the beginning, it catalyzed an intersectional understanding of how actually all of these movements are — it's one movement. It is us trying to fight for emancipation, liberation, agency and power, including the extent to which a lot of our own wealth is being vacuumed, like siphoned off from us.

Even things around like the #metoo movement and other kinds of hashtags, #blacklivesmatter, that a lot of those things, I think, tapped into a proliferation, a common understanding of our agency that I think traces back to Occupy — that idea that, like, we can do something. And I think that there was an early misjudgment or an unfair critique of Occupy that it's like, what even was all of this? You've galvanized and mobilized all these people and you didn't have clear demands about what needed to happen. And it's like, Yeah, but in retrospect, I don't know that that was what the purpose of Occupy was. What it did was it shook people awake from this reverie of, you know, to that point 30, 40 years of neoliberal policies that most folks are pretty ignorant about and got them turned on to what really is going on here. Why do we feel like we're sort of spinning our wheels vis-à-vis all these different movements, and also how does this help us understand our stakes of mutual stakes of liberation that we're not going to get free by, like just reforming, bank regulations, consumer protection kind of policies? We're not just going to be free by doing a cap and trade thing around climate that actually all of these movements really do need to be woven back together. And I think that a lot of that does tie back to occupy.

[Outro music: Lanterns – Hearth and Harvest]

Della Duncan: Thank you to Do Make Say Think, Will Stratton, Chris Zabriskie, Taylor Deupree, Karl Blau, and American Football for the music in this episode, and thank you to Bethan Mure for the cover art. Upstream theme music was composed by Robert.

This episode of Upstream was produced as part of a collective of podcasts brought together to explore the legacy of Occupy Wall Street, in light of the 10 year

anniversary. Through this project you can also hear analysis on the impact of Occupy from shows like The Dig, Economic Update, and Belabored — all podcasts that we definitely recommend checking out, if you haven't already. The producing partners for this project are the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's New York office and The New School's Milano program. You can learn more and listen to some of the other episodes by visiting RosaLux, that's rosalux.nyc/Occupy. And special thanks to Jenny Stanley for reaching out to us about producing this episode and for all of her support along the way.

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