

Assemblies and the struggle to diffuse power

Ethnographic examples and contemporary practices

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Abstract: The article is focused on the practical mechanisms of assembly management in egalitarian settings in a comparative perspective: on the one hand, I examine assemblies in what may be termed classic ethnographic settings (principally East African pastoralists); on the other hand, I turn to meetings in recent social movements (the Occupy movement in the United States and Slovenia; the 15M in Spain; Greece and Bosnia). I have two principal aims. First, I wish to identify and evaluate similarities and differences in the running of meetings with regard to processes of consensus building; the coordination of assemblies through the creation of roles and the menace of leadership; and the management of place, time, and speech. Second, I aim to evaluate current social movements' use of alterpolitics, intended as the practical and imaginary reference to group meetings of the historical, sectarian, or ethnic other.

Keywords: assembly, consensus, democracy, pastoralists, social movements

Assemblies may be seen as the scene of culturally diversified struggles between attempts to establish and defend dispersed power and tendencies to enforce its concentration. Diffused power in gatherings generates a complex process of polyphonic wills' harmonization: "common affairs" are managed by a *communitas* and participants "reach decisions by joint discussion" (Detienne 2003a: 16; cf. Richards 1971: 3). Social circuits that tend to have a horizontal power structure, one in which the influence exercised by participants is roughly equivalent, use meetings to share information and deliberate without resorting to representation or voting: "voluntary gatherings are greatly facilitated by the advent of free individuals prone to equality" (Detienne

2003a: 28). The ethnographic literature points out the nonauthoritarian blending of differences through a fair degree of horizontal decision-making procedures, in what some term "egalitarian" settings (Woodburn 1982; Salzman 1999), a notion I will use in this article. These social circuits often display a partial and selective egalitarianism, both in access to the assembly and in the daily running of affairs: there are, in some instances, marked inequalities along lines of gender, kinship, and age, reflected in a selective participation in assemblies, often the privilege of adult men. Horizontal assemblies tend to emerge in societies that have been termed egalitarian, not in absolute terms but in a comparative anthropological assessment, because they



state and apply, albeit with evident contradictions, principles of parity; lack institutionalized hierarchies; and privilege consensus-seeking techniques over coercion. Bassi (1996: 155–158), with reference to the pastoral Borana of Ethiopia, mentions that fines may be imposed by the assembly but are often pardoned if guilt is accepted. Accord is achieved through collective dialogue: those unsatisfied with the outcome may “vote with their feet” by simply refusing to comply (Kuper 1971: 17). Southall (1968) holds: “There is no evident authority over the band beyond diffuse disapproval and spontaneous and collective criticism and upbraiding that may be evoked by particularly callous and disruptive behavior”; Abélès (1983: 47, translation by the author), with reference to Ochollo, a southern Ethiopian community, states that “the toughest sanction that can strike an individual [is] ostracism.” In egalitarian societies, recourse to violence is accessible: social strains may lead to witchcraft accusations, ordeals, expulsions, assassinations, and feuds (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Clastres [1980] 1994).

Comparing assembly management in classic ethnographic settings and social movements

In what follows, I privilege an anthropological approach to the subtleties of ethnographic or autobiographic narrative, comparing meetings from markedly diverse historical and geographic contexts. On the one hand, I examine gatherings in what may be termed classic ethnographic studies: hunters and gatherers, shifting agriculturalists, and East African herdsman. In such settings power is fragmented, temporary, and dispersed among kinship units, bands, and age groups; gatherings are called to solve conflicts, manage common resources, coordinate ritual activity, and decide on the recourse to violence. On the other hand, I concentrate on social movements’ assemblies since 2011, principally the Occupy movement in the United States and Slovenia; the 15M in Spain; Greece’s gatherings; and

Bosnia’s plenums. Assemblies were substantially wiped out from ordinary social interaction in the northern Atlantic and Mediterranean, limited to run associations, squats, cooperatives, and social movements. The recent, massive resurgence of street mobilization coordinated itself through egalitarian assemblies, counting at times thousands of participants, and introduced several innovative techniques to run gatherings. These have been often codified and publicized in “guides”, “handbooks”, “cookbooks”, and “resolutions”. In what follows, I discuss similarities between assemblies of current social movements and those documented in classic ethnographies. Some striking differences, however, are evident and must be emphasized before proceeding.

First, sovereignty. An evident disparity exists with respect to the power exercised by the assembly, or what the meeting is called to deliberate upon. The authority of social movements’ assemblies is tendentially limited to its own organization or to affiliated settings (for example, collectives, demonstrations, squats). Movements’ meetings may decide to activate direct action, proceeding as if “the state did not exist” (Graeber 2009: 203), thus challenging the elected bodies’ monopoly of sovereignty; this inevitably leads to physical and/or judicial clashes with the established order. In contexts where central authorities are weak or absent, for lack of capacity or interest, the assembly may act as a sovereign, effective, and autonomous decision-making body, administering assets, justice, and collective violence, as documented in several classic ethnographic settings.

Second, codification. Most settings described in classic ethnographies are oral and encourage fluidity and negotiations (cf. Scott 2009); contemporary mobilizations generate formalized and written systematizations of their methods, procedures, and decisions, evident in the abundant production of minutes, stacks, advice to participants, and standard flowcharts of consensus. Hand signals in social movements are extremely codified, while in many classic ethnographic settings it appears that overall body language is considered relevant, with a plurality

of possible significant expressions ranging from crying to leaving the assembly. Social movements tend to opt for a rigid adherence to a written order of speech (cf. Herod 2007), while the succession of orations is seldom formally governed in other settings.

Third, social composition. The taxonomic mapping of participants' identities renders evident the incipient and partial status of assemblies in current European and North American settings, in comparison to areas that have a historical genealogy of sovereign meetings. While social movements activate either the subjective self, the "free" individual (predicated on the liberal notion that each one should have equal access to speech), or political/associational affiliations, in classic ethnographic contexts, participants are bounded by prevalent forms of social organization (kinship, residence, productive relations, age groups): there is, at times, recourse to more or less explicit forms of representation that render access to assembly procedures strongly uneven in terms of gender, seniority, and genealogical background. Moreover, crucial procedural appointments for an assembly's running are determined by the social or political persona (see, e.g., Bassi 1996: 153), while in contemporary social movements' mobilizations facilitators and other relevant consensus-building positions have to be trained theoretically.

Fourth, degree of practiced equality. Social movements, in the forms examined in this article, have shown a more coherent egalitarian and inclusive participatory ethos in comparison to several classic ethnographic settings in which discriminatory attribution of value to social categories is reflected in the relevance of public speech and assembly participation. In East Africa, as elsewhere, the right to intervene in gatherings is a prerogative reserved to adult men; elders tend to monopolize relevant offices. Moreover, meetings structured on kinship affiliation tend to leave out sectors of the resident population considered "outsiders" (Abélès 1983: 40–42; Salzman 1999; Southall 1968).

Fifth, dynamism and experimentation. Since the turn of the millennium, North Atlantic and

Mediterranean mobilizations consolidated consensus-building assemblies as the key decision-making process. The necessity to elaborate almost anew, and test empirically, tools for horizontal and participatory collective decisions required and promoted formalized theorization (of which this article is part) and effervescent creativity. While tools for consensus building have been part of the ordinary process of socialization in circuits described in many classic ethnographies, these have to be re-created in a setting in which many participants have a limited experience in the organization, running, and conduct required of large meetings. Thus, while in many settings meetings often start with some form of blessing or peace invocation, in some social movements the organization of the assembly and hand gestures are explained.

In the attempt to establish effective forms of collective, horizontal, and participatory deliberation, contemporary social movements confront problems and difficulties documented in classic ethnographies. Notwithstanding evident differences, a comparison of decision-making processes may prove practically helpful to emerging political activism in recognizing recurrent, potentially disruptive tensions and in appreciating the range of possible solutions. Ethnographies can be a vast and insightful source of inspiration, enriching, diversifying, and refreshing current assemblies' techniques in terms of procedural management, emotional pacification, and symbolic and linguistic devices. I also argue that the use of classic ethnographic insights in contemporary practices of consensual decision making can and should dodge the perils of exoticism: alterassemblies' techniques must be contextualized and experimented with practically rather than romanticized or idealized.

The ethnographic study of assemblies has been approached through multiple focuses (inclusion and exclusion of participants; symbolic and ritual aspects; language conventions during meetings; practices of citizenship; see, e.g., Abélès 1983; Bassi 1996; Banégas et al. 2012; Detienne 2003b; Richards 1971). Here the concern is on the practical mechanisms of assem-

bly management: the organization of the article reflects the privileged focus on the range of cultural solutions to recurrent operational concerns. First, attempts to construct and defend forms of horizontal political engagement are menaced by hierarchical tendencies; if these are not checked, the assembly loses its egalitarianism. Second, ethnographies of assembly point to the importance of collective processes aimed at producing consensus rather than voting. Third, role establishment is discussed comparatively to show how codified roles may facilitate procedures and promote common understanding. Fourth, I focus on the importance of an accessible location, on the management of time, and on precautions adopted against aggressive speech. Finally, assemblies are shown to be a political device that, when adopted, tends to reproduce itself in different settings. The conclusions evaluate social movements' current use of alterpolitics, intended, in relation to the emphasis of this theme section, as the practical and imaginary reference to other forms of assembly management.

The menace of hierarchical individual affirmation

Egalitarian settings need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the control over the emergence of charismatic leaders and, on the other hand, the expression of individual abilities. Ethnographies show that several comparatively horizontal contexts do not adopt large-scale assemblies, but rather activate more informal and restricted discussions (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940). When assemblies are activated, an elaborate and complex array of checks prevents power concentration. The power of those who hold prominent roles in public speech, social organization, or ritual is minimized or circumscribed: "The leader has no imperative authority, and apart from his undoubted prestige he seems to have far more obligations than rights" (Southall 1968; cf. Salzman 1999). Among the Nuer, for example, the leopard-skin chief was

represented by Evans-Pritchard (1940) as a ritual status, with a weak kinship network of support, able to activate a contained influence, limited to insistent persuasion, and aimed at social pacification: he could curse the party who refused his settlement but seldom did. Similarly, Clastres (1972, [1974] 1987: 77–78) went as far as arguing that the creation of powerless "chiefs" in Amerindian settings was intended to prevent the establishment of institutionalized coercive power. In nomadic bands, living principally off gathering and hunting, especially those characterized by immediate return, forms of affirmative and systematic egalitarianism are well documented (Lee and Daly 1999; Woodburn 1982). Collective deliberation in assemblies is enhanced by "the holding of basic resources—such as land, pasture, natural water sources, and uncultivated plants and trees—as common property, open and available to all members of the tribe or tribal section" (Salzman 1999: 41). It is thus not surprising that some of the most elaborated forms of horizontal assemblies documented ethnographically emerge in pastoral settings or in communities prone to war, to manage military action and booty division (Dettienne 2003a).

Normally assemblies are marked by an active dialectic between tendencies toward power concentration, deriving from oratory capacity or established roles, and a contrasting drive enhancing power dispersion, through the diversification of stances and the need to reach consensus. In Ochohlo the "dignitaries," in charge of convening the assembly and assuring that its deliberations are implemented, are in charge for a "limited duration" (Abélès and Abélès 1976: 89). Among the Cossacks "organization was initially [late sixteenth century] dominated by the assembly (the 'circle'), so chiefs and officers were revocable delegates" (Lebedynsky 2003: 147). Bassi (1996: 173, 153, translation by the author) accepts that in Borana assemblies there are "leaders" selected by the clans, but they should be "*super partes*," and their "prerogatives in decisional procedures are restricted by precise limitations, their role may be described as that

of experts who can be consulted in cases of disagreement or to better evaluate an issue ... they may not impose their decisions or will and thus cannot be considered chiefs.”

Social sciences have often framed the issue of power concentration in political institutions as the transition from more egalitarian to hierarchical societies, associated with the establishment of the state. Social circuits characterized by comparatively horizontal decision-making procedures have, in the long run, often failed to prevent the intrusion of and incorporation into centralized political institutions, as Scott (2009) has argued for Southeast Asia, while African village meetings were subsumed, manipulated, and emptied of their power in colonial and postcolonial settings (Kuper 1971; Bloch 1971). Several hierarchical institutions (political parties, trade unions, guerrilla groups, Marxist and liberal states) promoted assemblies emptied of purpose and of egalitarian and transparent procedures, becoming the impoverished choreographic manifestation of equality while decisions were made by restricted circles (see, e.g., Abélès 2000; Banégas et al. 2012; Crouch 2004; Faucher-King 2005; Maeckelbergh 2009).

Nonetheless, direct democracy, intended as horizontal decision-making bodies, survived over the centuries in what Graeber (2007; cf. Detienne 2003b) terms “spaces in between”: social circuits implementing self-government at and beyond the margins of state sovereignty. Assemblies played a key political role in the classic Mediterranean agoras, in medieval city-states in central Italy, and in farming villages in Southeast Asia up to the twentieth century (Scott 2009). Gatherings of warriors outside the state’s organizational structure have often stressed egalitarianism, as exemplified by Caucasian societies up to the mid-nineteenth century (Lebedynsky 2003; Charachidzé 2003) and pirate ships during the early eighteenth century (Rediker 2004). In several instances, gatherings express the authority of the *communitas* identified with the army and/or generically with what may be translated as “people” or “citizens”, coexisting with aristocratic or otherwise hierarchi-

cal institutions with which power is negotiated dynamically (Detienne 2003b). In most cases, a horizontal ethos has been coupled with various forms of discriminatory exclusion, most notably marginalizing the role of women, foreigners, slaves, and youngsters, as well as, in some contexts, with the creation of privileged offices in the gathering’s management.

The specificities of the democratic procedures within contemporary social movements are best appreciated if compared with previous forms of grassroots political activism. In Europe, assemblies featured predominantly in radical militants’ mass mobilizations since at least the 1960s but often covered vertical procedures of associations, parties, and unions (Della Porta 1996). Della Porta’s (2009a) analysis of decision-making processes within the Global Justice Movement during the latter part of the first decade of the new millennium is particularly precious for understanding the speed and logic of the recent increase in the number and size of assemblies. In Europe the Global Justice Movement contained diversified agencies with various forms of internal decision-making processes and values; the network was, however, dominated, both numerically and politically, by well-established, large, and resourceful organizations and associations, comprising political parties and trade unions of the “old left”, normally hierarchically structured even when defending nominally horizontal principles (Della Porta 2009c: 38–41; Reiter 2009). However, consensus-building methodologies were emerging among the newer, informal, and more horizontal groups and networks, characterized by smaller numbers of affiliates and lower budgets (Combes et al. 2009; Della Porta 2009a; Saunders 2009). In the same years in North America, complex, multiple, and varied yet convergent forms of consensus decision making were theorized, elaborated, and experimented with, activating facilitation and horizontal procedural norms (Graeber 2009: 228–237).

The massive assemblies of the last years, in comparison to the Global Justice Movement, express the application of a strengthened and more coherent egalitarian ethos, defended un-

compromisingly from hierarchical intrusions. With regard to democracy, the wave of contemporary European, North American, and Middle Eastern social movements have largely stopped expecting changes from government institutions and have rather focused on envisioning and establishing new forms of horizontal decision making (cf. Hanafi 2012). Recent mobilizations, less monopolized by powerful agents, combine the quest for radical reform of the democratic process (e.g., *Democracia Real YA!*, part of the 15M Spanish movement, and Bosnia's plenums) with a strong anti-institutional and egalitarian stance, strengthening the participatory tendencies within social movements. Political parties, trade unions, and other large and hierarchical organizations, which acted as key organizations in the Global Justice Movement, have been sidelined and marginalized in recent mobilizations. Delegation, when not completely ruled out, is revocable and closely monitored; executive oligarchies have been practically abolished.

The Greek movement expressed the principle clearly: "From the first day, on May 25 [2011], in Syntagma square, we set off direct democracy into an imperative project and started putting it into everyday practice deciding to take our life into our own hands."¹ Similar dynamics occurred in Spain, as described by Postill's (2014: 54) ethnography.

The encampments rapidly evolved into "cities within cities", governed through popular assemblies and committees. The committees were created around practical needs such as cooking, cleaning, communicating, and carrying out actions. Decisions were made through both majority rules voting and consensus. The structure was horizontal, with rotating spokespersons in lieu of leaders. Tens of thousands of citizens were thus experimenting with participatory, direct, and inclusive forms of democracy at odds with the dominant logic of political representation.

Contemporary social movements often accept only one legitimate authority, the assembly. The check on the tendency to generate strong leaders is achieved through office rotation, spokespersons' anonymity, and the distribution

of speech in assemblies (up to selecting randomly the order of speech; see Sergi and Vogiatzoglou 2013: 225), activating devices similar to those depicted in "classic" ethnographies. *The Occupation Cookbook*, which inspired the organization of some of Bosnia's 2014 plenums, states: "It is of utmost importance to suppress the 'leadership tendencies' from the very beginning."² One of assembly management's main principles in the Slovenia Occupy movement states: "[I]f you have already spoken, defer to those who have not yet had a chance to express themselves" (Razsa and Kurnik 2012: 242). In most large assemblies of the Occupy movement, a stackperson is in charge of making sure that those who want to get a chance to speak by setting a time limit for every voice. When the egalitarian ethos is central in assembly management, this tends to be coupled with a request for economic parity or at least for the reduction of the most evident forms of inequality. This is expressed in the slogan, "We are the 99 percent" and is experienced by hunters and gatherers and groups living off stock raising (Graeber 2011; cf. Bassi 1996: 252–255; Salzman 1999).

The logic of consensus

The refusal of delegation and the adoption of the logic of consensus was present but feeble in the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta 2009a: 85, cf. 2009c: 41; Reiter 2009), "more often mentioned by smaller organizations with lower budgets and no paid staff." Direct democracy, and consequently consensus-building methodologies, has gained ground and a coherent application in the mobilizations since 2011. This was certainly facilitated by the mass mobilization of individuals less attached to the "organizational loyalties" that persisted in the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta 2009a: 75). In several egalitarian settings, the assembly seeks, by addressing the concerns of those unhappy with a proposal and successive amendments, the consent of participants and the settlement of objections, not necessarily unanimity. Consensus,

referring to both the process and the outcome, is intended as a way of “seeking commonality” (Graeber 2009: 304) through group solidarity of belief and sentiment. While voting produces factions, consensus tends to balance the satisfaction of the different needs and thus be collaborative, inclusive, and participatory: several contemporary social movements thus refute elections and representation (Graeber 2007, 2009; Maeckelbergh 2009: 176–179). The process of consensus building encourages participants, on the one hand, to place the good of the whole above individual or partisan preferences and, on the other hand, should agreement not be forthcoming, to address and solve divergences with those who are less happy with the general orientation. When there is potential for a decision to be blocked, all parts are encouraged to collaborate. Simply vetoing a deliberation is not considered a responsible use of consensus techniques. The options to solve the impasse may be to strive toward an acceptable compromise; to work on alternative proposals; or to acknowledge differences between views and proceed by affinity groups, each sustaining its path independently.

In European social movements’ past, minority factions have often been able to block assemblies or distort their outcome by monopolizing speech and insisting uncompromisingly on certain issues. It thus became crucial for current decision-making procedures to find organizational tools that allow the expression of feelings by the audience, not reduced to passive listeners. Over the last years, beginning in the Anglo-Saxon environment, social movements have made a growing use of hand gestures in assemblies (cf. Della Porta 2009a); these are codified signals enabling listeners to communicate their feelings on what is being said by the speaker. Even though codes admit variations, the ones most commonly used indicate agreement, disagreement, the request for clarification, and the will to block a deliberation. Gestures enable, among other advantages, having a clear and immediate manifestation of the audience’s orientation. As Occupy Los Angeles

puts it: “Consensus is measured through temperature checks—where the assembly is asked to make their feelings known through hand gestures. ... Proposals will not pass and become Resolutions unless the Assembly agrees, as one, that they will pass.”³ Similarly, the People’s Mic, the vocal repetition of speech by the gathering, allows a codeliberation by the audience, as it can be used to facilitate or to shut down public discourse (Garces 2012). Negri (2011, translation by the author) with regard to the Spanish 15M movement, states: “There is maximum cooperation, that is not produced by individual and/or groups but organized ‘all together.’”

The moral principles of several 15M and Occupy settings recall closely the social dynamics of meetings described by ethnographers elsewhere:

The Ochollo insist strongly on the unanimity that is achieved at the end of deliberation. The result of the pronunciations gives rise to a truly dominant opinion that imposes itself to the point of taking on board all opinions. Clearly the idea of voting, of a calculation of some sort of those having a certain opinion and of the opponents, is alien to this notion of democracy. (Abélès 1983: 46, translation by the author; cf. 53–54)

This, Abélès notes, does not mean that there are no conflicts and factions within the assembly, but that there is a strenuous attempt toward reconciliation that is both the aim and the expected outcome: “[A]nything, in effect, is preferable, to the break down of the political unity symbolized by the meeting in the public space.” The Borana of Ethiopia, termed by Bassi (1996: 164–165, 178–179, 241–243) an “assembly society”, stimulate general participation in sizable assemblies by sending messengers announcing meetings to the communities and by breaking up large gatherings into smaller groups to widen active involvement in the debate. The process of consensus building is facilitated by giving praise or “blessing” those who back down from their

initial position while despising and “cursing” those who, indifferent to the meeting’s orientation, maintain a stance contrary to the general consensus. The entries for “political organization” in the *Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers* display two recurrent notions: “autonomy”, used to characterize the relation between individual and group; and “consensus”, used to describe the process leading to decisions on collective matters (Lee and Daly 1999).

Coordination and role definition

The need to have an efficient and thus deliberative assembly, especially if gatherings are large, requires the appointment of specific positions to illustrate controversial points; to guarantee smooth and peaceful procedures; to ensure equality in access to speech; to adhere to the agenda and time requirements; and to summarize the assembly’s orientation and decisions. The establishment of authorities is, however, also a potential threat to the horizontal structure of the meeting. Offices are thus closely monitored by the audience to make sure that their conduct is coherent with what is expected and required: promoting the assembly’s success. Thus, those in charge should restrain from advancing partisan positions or formulating synthesis of deliberations not in line with the audience’s understanding.

In recent social movements’ assemblies, as in classic ethnographic settings, it is considered beneficial that some officeholders speak on behalf of the collective and not with factional tones. In Quaker meetings and, Graeber (2009: 129) believes, in militant settings in North America, the facilitator “is not supposed to give his own opinion, but simply run the meeting, listen and repeat if something needs to be clarified.” Being “a good orator”, able to achieve “*consensus omnium*”, is one of the “traits of the Indian leader ... [that] recurs throughout the two Americas” (Clastres [1974] 1987: 29, 30; cf. 1972: 77–78). In Ochollo, some appointments and phases of the assembly are conceived as promoting the

general consensus by pronouncing “conciliatory phrases”: those holding central positions often speak for the collective benefit; “they should embody consensus rather than introduce ‘factional’ opinions. Power of interpretation of the general tendency, influence at most: the function of dignitaries never implies domination, but, at most, the modulation of a common political choice” (Abélès 1983: 53, translation by the author). In Ochollo and among the Borana, while some moments of the gathering are opened to argument and dissent, the speech of recognized authorities should describe the issue at stake without taking a stance; attempt a synthesis and propose solutions, pacifications, and compromises; and try to keep the dialogue on constructive terms and tones (Abélès 1983: 45, 51–56; Bassi 1996: 174–175). Similarly, amongst the Nuer, the leopard-skin chief is supposed to act as a neutral mediator (Evans-Pritchard 1940).

These preoccupations and organizational forms resemble those adopted in the assemblies of recent social movements in the United States and Spain using facilitators, moderators, and spokespersons.⁴ These appointments rest on a temporary and functional delegation of power from the assembly. With the exception of the note taker, these roles—of course, with distinct cultural sensibilities—were covered, more or less formally, in ethnographically documented assemblies. In the “Quick Guide on Group Dynamics in People’s Assemblies” of the Puerta del Sol Protest camp in Madrid, one reads: “An important way of helping the Assembly to run smoothly is to incorporate one or two people who intervene when there are silences, overheated discussions or serious digressions. Their main role is to remind assembly participants of the importance of Collective Thinking, Active Listening and the true meaning of Consensus.”⁵ The moderator, as ironically presented in the Occupy Los Angeles’s *Dummy’s Guide to General Assembly*, recalls some of the features of assemblies’ coordinators in other settings: little consequence is attributed to their speech, as among Clastres’s (1972) Guayaki; their power is intended as a collective service, as in Evans-

Pritchard's (1940) Nuer and Bassi's (1996) Borana; their action is checked by an assistant, in order to distribute power, as in Rediker's (2004; cf. Bassi 1996: 174, 199) pirate ships.

Moderator and their job is to talk into the mic and suffer abuse from Trade Unionists, Subversive Intelligence, and the occasional asshole. Aside from getting yelled at every so often, the Moderator composes the **Order of the Day** and makes sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. They are helped out by a Shadow Moderator... The Facilitator changes for every single General Assembly.⁶

The management of place, time, and speech

Most assemblies in comparatively egalitarian contexts are normally open to all adult men who should have a chance to "debate common affairs" (Detienne 2005: 11). The loci selected to hold assemblies are public spaces reserved for community speech, intended as the exercise of power beyond the individual, an influence exercised by and for the collective. If consensus is the aim, it is crucial that meetings be held in spaces accessible to the public, easy to identify, and visible. This, of course, is not an issue in small-scale bands. Among pastoralists, villages may reserve a specific location, inscribed in the group's social, ritual, and cosmological topography, as the assembly place (Abélès 1983: 26–33); Abélès and Abélès (1976) illustrate the various layers of meetings' locations in Ochollo and the codified placement of roles within the gathering's space. Among the Borana, small and short assemblies are held under a tree or in a square, while the location of meetings that may involve thousands and may last one month is agreed upon by an organizational committee (Bassi 1996: 226–234).

After centuries in which crowd gatherings were increasingly stigmatized, even outlawed, current social movements have had to reinstate

spaces for the assemblies, the place of popular political discourse, threatening the institutional one. Deaf to the increasing demands for participatory democracy, institutions keep repeating that citizens' political involvement is supposed to be channeled through votes and representation, not exercised in the streets. Unsurprisingly, current social movements have, normally, selected assembly sites in large, central, public spaces (parks and squares), often close to key dominant institutions (see, e.g., Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2013). The space of popular political deliberation is transformed by the multiplication of tents, meetings, stages, kitchens, demonstrations, and clashes, blending political issues with residence and socialization. The emergence of a concurrent political space—that of the assembly—was not well received by elected governments, which have invariably wiped out violently assembly sites and restored institutional buildings as the sole locus of political activity.

Since consensus decision making seeks the input of all participants, it can be a time-consuming process (cf. Della Porta 2009a). Assemblies are often slow and uncertain processes: on crucial points, complicated by a clash of interests, consensus is seldom achieved quickly. The time of the assembly is clearly opposed to the frenetic time of hierarchical and entrepreneurial institutions: social movements require assemblies that have patience and respect for speakers and dissent.⁷ This is a potential liability in situations where decisions need to be made speedily or where it is not possible to canvass the opinions of all delegates in a reasonable time. A series of techniques have been used to achieve an adequate pace: slow enough to let participants elaborate and reach consensus, fast enough so that issues do not just remain unsolved. In contemporary movements, a timekeeper may be designated to ensure the decision-making body keeps to the schedule set in the agenda. Effective timekeepers use a variety of techniques to ensure the meeting runs on time, including: frequent time updates, ample warning of short time, and checks on individ-

ual speakers' contributions. Razsa and Kurnik (2012) describe the use of time by the Slovenian Occupy's assembly as marked by dynamism, capacity to change strategy, and working on successive steps. In classic ethnographic settings, namely, the Borana and Ochoollo, similar tasks were achieved informally: when consensus was not forthcoming, for example, the assembly was closed and adjourned to give way to informal and more restricted attempts to solve problematic issues (Abélès 1983: 46; Bassi 1996: 168).

Consensus should, at the same time, be grounded on "good communication" (Della Porta 2009a: 79–80): agreement is facilitated if speakers do not accuse or verbally abuse each other. Contemporary social movements have elaborated advice drawn from consensus-building experiences to enhance constructive group communication. The "rules" to run the assemblies of Occupy Slovenia invite members to "respect the expression of others"; refrain from personal dialogues, cutting off the assembly; avoid interruptions; and try to speak for and not against proposals (cf. Razsa and Kurnik 2012: 242). Moreover, an "empathy" or "vibeswatch" monitors the "emotional climate" of the meeting, taking note of the body language and other nonverbal clues; defusing potential emotional conflicts; maintaining a climate free of intimidation; and blocking potentially destructive power dynamics, such as sexism or racism.⁸ Similarly, assemblies among the Borana and the Merina of Madagascar have norms defending speech from interruptions; stressing the importance of politeness and "peace"; rejecting aggressiveness; and encouraging the phrasing of criticisms through indirect reference or highly formalized expressions. In some instances, when emotions run high, prominent positions within the assembly ritually cry to block potentially destructive group dynamics (Bloch 1971: 50–52; Bassi 1996: 168–170, 198–199). Among the Ochoollo, assemblies admit recourse to insults and "verbal violence" and may be "tumultuous"; in such cases "dignitaries" intervene by menacing fines (Abélès 1983: 46, 53).

The multiplication of assemblies

Mobilizations of the last years in Spain, the United States, and Greece have called for and implemented an alternation of large assemblies, for issues of general interest, and smaller gatherings, both as working groups referring to the general assembly and as decentralized assemblies in neighborhoods, municipalities, workplaces, and schools. Negri (2011, translation by the author) states with regard to the 15M movement in Spain:

Here a new model of representation is proposed. On the one hand networks, on the other assemblies. From the assemblies of the central squares of cities, one descends through the network to the local assemblies in the neighborhoods of the metropolis and then in small cities and villages. The ascending way back is equally direct and fast. The minute organization from below of the assemblies thus constitutes the route and the structure of "real democracy", *beyond* representation. (emphasis in original)

In some social movements the general assembly has a prominent role; in others, the smaller working groups retain the larger role. In recent Greek mobilizations the initial meetings, held in Syntagma Square, were accompanied by local councils known as "neighborhood assemblies of struggle" or "people's assemblies". In most instances, larger convocations feed on the work carried out in smaller gatherings (TPTG 2011: 120; Sergi and Vogiatzoglou 2013: 225; cf. Juris 2012; Maeckelbergh 2009, 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012). Assembling has been termed a "political ambulatory" reproducible in various scales and settings (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2013: 122).⁹ Communities deliberate only on issues that are of their immediate concern; meetings are therefore differentiated according to the topic discussed. The multiplication and fragmentation of assemblies is documented in most classic

ethnographic settings: the meeting's topic is associated with the extension and composition of the gathering. Among the Borana, specific assemblies address judiciary issues; the management of wells and grazing fields; parental matters; and themes concerning the general "ethnic" assembly (Bassi 1996). The Merina structured assemblies according to gender and topic (Bloch 1971). Abélès and Abélès (1976: 91; cf. 1983: 42–56) subdivide meetings in Ochoilo according to three variables: plenary, restricted to dignitaries and elders, and matters concerning sacrifice. Assemblies in age-class systems are distinguished by degrees and domains. When centralized power is rejected, influence is exercised through various dispersed collective sovereignties that make decisions in their limited sphere of concern.

Inspirational sources for social movements' alterpolitics

Social movements' understanding of alterassemblies may be seen as lying between two gazes. First is the symbolic adherence to an idealized exotic *alter*, often seen as an essential diversity from current "Western" dynamics. This radical dichotomy is often used to inspire imaginative purity and perfection of alterassemblies while practical attempts to implement organizational devices in current gatherings remain stagnant. Second, the *other* is seen as one of many sources of applicable insights. In such instances, a more or less conscious reference to alternative cultural options is used to resolve practical problems, without necessarily activating vibrant identitarian evocations. Human interaction does not just produce identities; it also requires the practical resolution of concrete problems. On certain crucial features of assembly management, the convergences between social movements and classic ethnographic settings are principally practical rather than imaginative or ideological: recent attempts to establish new democratic procedures have sought in alterpolitics efficient practices rather than romantic exoticism.

Recent social movements have blended creatively different perspectives and backgrounds through local experimentation in what Graeber (2012; cf. Maeckelbergh 2012) termed an "embrace of radical diversity." Thorburn (2012: 269) contends that "[c]ontemporary assemblies are heterogeneous; they do not seek to eradicate difference, as the philosophy of unity that drove much of the Leninist style organising of earlier eras did, but rather use the sectarian, gender, racial, and class differences contained within the assembly as a creative force for the advancement of a dialectical political vector."

Various sources of inspiration, all marked by an egalitarian, collaborative, independent, transparent, inclusive, and participatory ethics, are influential in shaping assembly procedures. Inspirational alterassemblies are comprised of: Latin American movements, seen as a leading example of communitarian consciousness (Chiapas, *piqueteros*, factory self-management, communitarian cooperatives, highland Bolivian communities); collectives that, since the 1960s, have shaped antinuclear and pacifist protests, radical feminism, anarchist-inspired direct action, middle-class environmentalism, and, more recently, the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta 2009b; Graeber 2007, 2009: 228–237; Juris and Pleyers 2009; Maeckelbergh 2012; Nash 1997); communicative ecology and sign language;¹⁰ Quakers' consensus-building techniques; and hacker and free software culture (Juris 2012; Postill 2013, 2014; Saunders 2009: 164–167). When power is diffused, the organizational form taken by the gathering will be the one deemed most convenient, and thus drawing least opposition, in that particular setting: standardization and fanaticism are kept at bay by the multivocal diversification of acceptable insights. One could argue that social movements' will to elaborate an highly hybrid inspirational genealogy of assembly procedures to a certain extent transcends the idea of otherness, having no absolute other to construct, neither to love nor to hate.

In the running of social movements' assemblies, alterpolitics, in the sense of looking for

insights in diverse settings, is recognized as a source of inspiration without being invested with an uncritical symbolic attachment. Without ideological preconceptions, mobilizations in different parts of the Mediterranean and North Atlantic invented, experimented, and combined practices with a clear scope: maximizing participation and democracy while safeguarding the effectiveness of the deliberation process. Exotic references are irrelevant in the actual management of assemblies, scarce in both their theoretical formulations and historical evocations. Current assemblies' administration could actually benefit more from the creative inspiration provided by classic ethnographic descriptions and anthropological readings of the multiple styles and multifaceted options activated cross-culturally in the struggle to diffuse power.

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Notes

1. Globalchange, "Direct democracy principles and theses," <http://takethesquare.net/> 13 November 2011.
2. *The Occupation cookbook* (Center for Anarchist Studies, 2009), marcbousquet.net/pubs/The-Occupation-Cookbook.pdf, p. 33.
3. See occupylosangeles.org/assemblyguide.
4. "Who leads Spain's 15-M movement?," johnpostill.com/2011/08/16/who-leads-spains-15-m-movement/; for a practical example, see Real Democracy Italy.
5. "Quick guide on group dynamics in people's assemblies, Commission for Group dynamics, Puerta del Sol Protest camp, Madrid," 13 June 2011, p. 3.
6. See occupylosangeles.org/assemblyguide; emphasis in original.
7. roarmag.org/2011/07/the-syntagma-experiment-democracy-from-the-bottom-up/
8. www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/consensus.html.
9. For Spain, see Postill (2014); for Greece, see Globalchange, "Resolution of the people's assembly of Syntagma Square," 14 October 2011, <http://takethesquare.net/>; for a theoretical assessment, see "Real democracy: Negotiating difference within consensus," <http://genealogyofconsent.wordpress.com/2011/12/13>.
10. See www.seedsforchange.org.uk; the Occupy Wall Street guide, www.nycga.net; "Quick guide on group dynamics in people's assemblies, Commission for Group dynamics, Puerta del Sol Protest camp, Madrid," 13 June 2011.

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