

# The Civic Imagination

---

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN AMERICAN POLITICAL LIFE**

---

Gianpaolo Baiocchi  
Elizabeth A. Bennett / Alissa Cordner  
Peter Taylor Klein / Stephanie Savell



ROUTLEDGE



# *The Civic Imagination*

*Making a Difference in American Political Life*

Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Elizabeth A. Bennett,  
Alissa Cordner, Peter Taylor Klein, and  
Stephanie Savell

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vi</i>
1 American Civic and Political Life	1
2 Joining Groups and Following Activists	19
3 “I Am Not Political”: Making Sense of Skeptical Engagement	37
4 The Civic Imagination	52
5 Participation 2.0: The Politics of Civic Innovation	77
6 Inequality: A Difficult Conversation	96
7 Making a Difference in American Political Life	114
<i>Methodological Appendix A: How Many Scholars Does It Take to Answer a Question?</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Methodological Appendix B: Life of “Project” Tatiana Andia</i>	<i>145</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>169</i>
<i>About the Authors</i>	<i>173</i>

# *Preface and Acknowledgments*

A few short months after we concluded the fieldwork for this book, the Occupy movement burst on the scene and captured Americans' collective imagination. For our research team, the idea of a movement for the 99 percent was intriguing, not only because we had been thinking and writing about creative forms of engagement but also because inequality resonated as one of our greatest concerns. Occupy, as the movement came to be called, was not unique; other such spontaneous democratic protests arose elsewhere in the world, from the Spanish Indignados, to Real Democracy Now! in England, to the Arab Spring. It felt, in some ways, that a common thread of hope, outrage, tenacity, and creativity was beginning to weave together populations that had previously seemed worlds apart. Despite—or perhaps *because of*—Occupy's lack of a clear ideology, a specified platform, or a direct relationship with existing movements, “occupy” quickly became a one-word moniker for fighting structural injustice. Public encampments—literally, “occupations”—sprang up nearly everywhere in the United States, as did symbolic and metaphorical iterations, like Occupy Rosh Hashanah and the more recent Occupy Sandy.<sup>1</sup> Despite some early derision from members of the Democratic Party, and outright hostility from commentators on the political Right, Occupy appeared to capture Americans' need to have a more meaningful experience of democracy.

We were struck by how many of the issues raised by the Occupy movement resonated with our findings about contemporary political culture in America. In Providence, the site of our research, Occupy arrived a bit late, though a small cluster of tents remained in a city park for months, reminding passersby of the “99 percent.” The city eventually deemed the occupation “unsafe” and “illegal.” The city court mediated negotiations with the activists, who eventually agreed to disband

---

1. Occupy Rosh Hashanah first took place on September 16, 2011, when a thousand people gathered in New York City to reflect on the relationship between the Jewish holiday and the values of Occupy. The Occupy Sandy movement was born in late October 2012. It offered disaster relief and drew attention to issues of inequality in response to Hurricane Sandy, a “superstorm” that ravaged the East coast, particularly low-lying neighborhoods in and around New York City.

the camp in exchange for a new day shelter for the homeless to be sponsored and hosted by a local Catholic church. Though controversial and complicated for the activists, the mayor's office dubbed the agreement a "peaceful end of Occupy Providence's encampment" (Taveras 2012). Indeed, Occupy activity soon dwindled, and attention returned to Rhode Island's severe economic recession and high rates of unemployment.

The sudden appearance of Occupy in Providence connects with several of the themes that were apparent throughout our fieldwork, and that we discuss in this book. In particular, we found that dissatisfaction with the political system is at the core of how Americans experience democracy, and that creative imagining of new futures is central to how they work to rebuild it. Americans' frequent—and vehement—disavowal of politics is not necessarily a route to thin commitments or to avoid important issues. Instead, it creates space to rescue a sense of democratic possibility and renewal. That Occupy turned its back on traditional politics while creating a movement centered on addressing inequality and reinventing democracy should put to rest any notion that widespread disavowal of politics necessarily signals that democratic values have been lost.<sup>2</sup>

Occupy's manifesto includes a stated mistrust of "the political elites of both parties that run this country." In this book we describe many activists who assert, "What I do isn't political," and that "politics is dirty and broken." Occupy may not see eye to eye on all things political with the neighborhood association leaders, tech-savvy entrepreneurs, or education activists we describe in this book, but this commonality should not be underestimated. Indeed, these shared sentiments hold unique possibilities in the current moment for unusual and unexpected alliances. As many a commentator has noted, Occupy's broad appeal won over sympathizers from beyond the usual suspects of movement activists.<sup>3</sup> Even the business-oriented magazine *Wired* hired a writer to embed with Occupy camps around the country and file gritty (if mostly complementary) stories on the movement, its activists, and their clashes with the police (Norton 2012).

Occupy also shows that the relationship between citizens and the state is complicated, that inequality is hard to talk about, and that, even with the best of intentions, people can be blind to some aspects of social life—all issues we examine

---

2. Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce, and Penny Lewis, faculty researchers at the City University of New York, surveyed 729 protesters at a May 1, 2011, Occupy march and rally in New York City and conducted extensive interviews with twenty-five people who were core activists in the Occupy movement. They found that "most OWS [Occupy Wall Street] Activists and supporters were deeply skeptical of the mainstream political system as an effective vehicle for social change." However, "despite being disillusioned with mainstream politics, many OWS activists and supporters remain politically active and civically engaged" (2013, 4).

3. As Milkman, Luce, and Lewis report, Occupy "was able to attract supporters with a wide variety of specific concerns, many of whom had not worked together before" (2013, 5).

in this book. The debates that have plagued and divided Occupy are similar to the stories that fill these pages. Does Occupy support progressive politicians or unions? Should Occupiers vote in the next election? What can Occupy do to avoid reinforcing race, class, and gender power imbalances? The ideas and ideologies, tactics and tendencies that divide and unite civic groups are fuzzy, complicated, and far from self-evident. And taking on inequality only amplifies the challenges. If Occupy came about because of the need to address inequality, its trajectory is marked by the challenge that naming inequality poses. It is easier to talk abstractly (albeit creatively!) about the richest 1 percent than to address, concretely, inequalities within the 99 percent. Likewise, it is more straightforward to use a “progressive stack” in assemblies—allowing women and people of color to talk first—than to bring marginalized groups into the fore of leadership, visibility, and power and sustain those roles over time. No doubt, Occupy has thus far been challenged by its limited ability to transform itself from a movement organized around “demanding the impossible”—to use Judith Butler’s words—to a movement organizing to propose and pursue the possible (Butler 2011).<sup>4</sup>

Our goal in writing this book has been to contribute to ongoing efforts to reinvigorate civic and political life, and to do so with attention to, and normative preference for, activism that begets greater equality. Many of our stylistic and analytic choices were underwritten by these greater intentions. We hope that the civic imaginations we describe will be fodder for debates in cultural sociology; yet we wish them to be even more consequential for engaged citizens and students trying to understand the potentials and limits of certain ways of seeing, judging, and imagining the world. Another one of the choices we made, which was somewhat at odds with our academic reflexes, was to rely on a mode of critique that literary theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003) calls “reparative.” Both “reparative critique” and its more typical counterpart, “paranoid critique,” unmask power and unveil domination. However, paranoid critique stops there—blinding us to possibility and impoverishing our ability to see agency. Paranoid modes are important and powerful, but Sedgwick invites us to also think about what the knowledge we produce *can do* and urges us to question the steadfastness of power that paranoid critiques assume. Our writing has rested, instead, on the assumption that a text may seek to unearth surprises, draw attention to creativity and agency, richly describe the world, and point to renewed possibilities and avenues for change. Finally, following in the path of normative philosophers and critical sociologists, we are unapologetic for injecting the value of equality into our analysis of what it means to *revive* and to live in a democracy *revived by* civic engagement.

The need to address the social problems of our time—and the need to do so without relying exclusively on government—has captured the American imagination, and we, in turn, are captured by how Americans have put their imaginations to work. These are the stories that fill the pages of this book. Of course, another

---

4. For Butler’s comments, and those of other writers who “support Occupy Wall Street and the Occupy Movement around the world,” see <http://occupywriters.com>.

headline-grabbing movement in recent years, the Tea Party movement, is also founded on mistrust of political institutions, though their focus is not promoting the reduction of inequality (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011). Understanding democratic possibilities, or alternatively, the contractions of democracy, in any one moment or context calls for the kind of careful analysis we have done here. As the saying goes, the politics is in the details.

\* \* \*

This book, as we describe in Appendix A, was born from an experiment, itself hatched in a classroom. We began as a group of students and a professor at Brown University and ended the journey as a group of friends and colleagues, all professors or nearly so, and most of us no longer at Brown. Along the way we have incurred innumerable debts, big and small, that made the research, and the book, possible. We cannot list everyone who helped, though we must mention a few.

First, our partners and families put up with more talk of our project—which we came to refer to as “Project” (see Methodological Appendix A)—than they deserved, and for their support we are endlessly indebted and grateful. Special thanks to our hosts in Maine, who provided a serene environment for fieldnote coding.

Second, we thank our host institution of Brown University. While we did not receive direct funding from Brown for any of this work, the university provided a lively intellectual context that, in many ways, shaped our conversations. Stephanie received an Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship/National Science Foundation (IGERT/NSF) fellowship from the Graduate Program for Development that supported two years of research and writing. Gianpaolo had a one-semester fellowship from the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women as research started, and a one-semester fellowship from the Cogut Center for the Humanities during the writing process; both opportunities reduced teaching loads and provided intellectual conversation. During the formative moments of the research, we received invaluable advice from our “research board”: Marcy Brink-Danan, Sharon Krause, Catherine Lutz, Keith Morton, and Corey Walker. At Brown, we are also grateful for the insights and encouragement of Tatiana Andia, Diana Graizbord, and Michael Rodríguez Muñiz.

Many thanks to Paradigm Publishers; Dean Birkenkamp’s willingness to take a gamble with us was crucial for our group process, as was his generosity with deadlines, thoughtful feedback, and consistent encouragement. Our afternoon visit and work with Javier Auyero was invaluable, as was critical but affirming feedback from Claudio Bezenry, as we were deciding on putting together a book. Our writing benefited tremendously from suggestions gathered in two workshops, one at the University of Georgia Political Ethnography Workshop, where we received feedback from Becca Hanson, Pablo Lapegna, and David Smilde; the other at the University of São Paulo working group on political society and collective action, where we received feedback from Domitila Caires, Adrian Gurza Lavalle, and José Swazko. Similarly, the manuscript was improved by the questions and comments gathered

at meetings of the American Sociological Association, Eastern Sociological Society, and Western Political Science Association. In this regard, special thanks are due to Caroline Lee and Edward Walker. We are also extremely indebted to the readers of the manuscript whose insights were critical to the final version: Claudio Bezencry, Nina Eliasoph, Pablo Lapegna, Peter Levine, and Michael Schudson. Naturally, the standard disclaimer applies: all errors and omissions are our own responsibility.

Finally, our greatest debt is to the people who allowed us into their meeting spaces and living rooms, making time in their busy schedules and hectic lives to share with us their dreams, ideas, activism, and knowledge. If they felt skeptical of our curiosity or tired of our intrusions, then they were infinitely more patient and generous, continuing to allow us, and thus our readers, into their experience of bringing forth new visions of a better city and a better civic life. We do not mention them by name in this book, but we hope they find their yearnings well represented, their words and actions accurately described, and our analysis meaningful. It is to them this book is warmly dedicated.

\* \* \*

A note on citing this work: While we understand that standard citation practices would limit an in-text citation to the first of the five authors of this book, as in “(Baiocchi et al. 2014),” we respectfully ask you to avoid this custom when referring to the book if at all possible. It is our preference that you cite all of our names, as in “(Baiocchi, Bennett, Cordner, Klein, and Savell 2014),” or refer to us in alternative fashion, such as “the authors of *The Civic Imagination*.”