The Occupy Movement in Žižek’s hometown:

Direct democracy and a politics of becoming

ABSTRACT
In an otherwise sympathetic speech to Occupy Wall Street, Slavoj Žižek dismissed protesters’ pursuit of direct democracy as a “dream.” In no small part responding to a perceived crisis of representative politics, however, the popular movements that swept through northern Africa, Europe, and North America during 2011 have been distinguished by their adoption of direct democratic forms. This initial ethnography—collaboratively researched and written by a Slovene activist-theorist and a U.S. anthropologist—considers the significance of the Occupy Movement’s democratic practices in Žižek’s own hometown. We trace the development of decidedly minoritarian forms of decision making—the “democracy of direct action,” as it is known locally—to activists’ experiences of organizing for migrant and minority rights in the face of ethnonationalism. We compare the democracy of direct action to Occupy Wall Street’s consensus-based model. In conclusion, we ask how ethnographic attention to the varieties of emergent political forms within the current global cycle of protest might extend recent theorizing of radical politics and contribute to broader efforts to reimagine democracy.

Activists in Ljubljana, Slovenia, were already planning an encampment modeled on Occupy Wall Street (OWS) when they watched the YouTube video of Slavoj Žižek, their city’s most famous son, addressing the protests in lower Manhattan on October 9, 2011. They were stunned. Perhaps, they speculated, the experience of hearing each line of his speech echo out through the “people’s mic” had swept Žižek up in the spirit of the movement, a spirit that Chris Garces termed the “exuberance of democratic self-fashioning” (2011). Activists had not expected Žižek to support OWS because, his international reputation as a radical philosopher notwithstanding, his writings largely dismiss the possibility of political resistance to capitalism (e.g., Žižek 2007). Furthermore, as Barbara, an activist in her mid-thirties whose political experience stretches to the globalization protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s, pointed out, as member and theorist of the Liberal Democratic Party, Žižek had never supported the radical, migrant, and minority struggles out of which Ljubljana’s own Occupy Movement grew. Even so, much of Žižek’s speech resonated with the wave of activism that swept through Ljubljana in the fall of 2011, beginning with an October 14 teach-in at Nova Ljubljanska Banka (NLB), Slovenia’s largest bank.

I was among the activists jostling with security guards that day in the foyer of the NLB’s Ljubljana headquarters. The guards insisted the space was private and barred our entry. Irfan, an activist from the Erased, the association of those who were stripped of permanent residence when Slovenia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, retorted that NLB was state owned and therefore public property. Andrej, an experienced radical activist, political theorist, and coauthor of this article, turned to the chief of security and went further: “You are making decisions here..."
about the common wealth (skupno bogastvo) we’ve all produced and you are mismanaging that wealth. We will open a new public space here,” he continued, “and we will speak about alternatives.” Taking advantage of a moment of hesitation, we surged past the guards. We were soon chanting, “We will not pay for your crisis!” in the marble lobby. Next we repeated, “No one represents us!” at once a condemnation of Slovenia’s political parties and European technocrats and a declaration of autonomy. These chants, as well as activists’ self-conscious decision to sidestep political institutions and directly confront financial ones, echoed Žižek’s (2011a) prognosis of a general crisis of electoral politics and his denouncement of political representation as the outsourcing of our political engagement.

The activists who spoke at NLB understood their actions in precisely these terms; disavowing representation, they spoke of their own direct experiences of precarity, unemployment, and even poverty. Sara, 30, employed intermittently by research institutes and NGOs, described the failure of any legal status—student, employee, unemployed—to match the conditions of her life and, therefore, secure her basic social rights, such as pension contributions, health insurance, and unemployment benefits. Armin, a 28-year-old Bosnian migrant and activist in the Invisible Workers of the World, described living in 22 square meters with his wife and infant daughter. Romana, who had secured permanent employment (zaposlenost za nedoločen čas), listed her living expenses in relation to her pay, an accounting that showed that, “if nothing goes wrong this month...€30 [§38] remains for books, lessons, concerts, theater, clothes, shoes, etc.” Whether speaking from personal experience, eschewing political parties, intervening directly against financial institutions, or deciding collectively in assemblies to take actions like the teach-in, Slovene activists described themselves as filling a vacuum created by the crisis of representative politics. When we tucked into a café to debrief after the teach-in, Barbara stated that “the center of our political practice here is a commitment to direct democracy, especially the local approach we’ve come to call the ‘democracy of direct action’... It’s about initiating a liberation movement in which our different struggles can converge and together we can seize back control of our lives.”

Although Slovene activists were not to reconcile with Žižek—who, in the end, told OWS that direct democracy was a “dream”——his broader analysis (2011a), like that of Judith Butler (2011) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2011), positioned the Occupy Everywhere Movement as a critical response to a fundamental crisis of representative politics. The causes of this crisis are multiple, some specific to national contexts, others global—many beyond the scope of this article. On the one hand, political representatives appear to have been captured by economic elites, as political parties increasingly represent the interests of financial institutions and other major corporations (Reich 2008). The capture of political elites has been accomplished through campaign finance and lobbying (among other mechanisms) in the United States (Moyers 2008) and through the tight imbrication of the political class and post-privatization economic elites in Slovenia (Kovač 2008). On the other hand, because of its institutionalization of property rights, liberal democracy is precluded from addressing some of the most basic issues of social and economic life (Hardt and Negri 2011), especially the supposedly apolitical “social relations of production” (Žižek 2011b). In the face of the global economic crisis and calls for ever-greater austerity, the narrowed scope of liberal democracy has meant that even the most basic pleas for “shelter, food and employment [become] impossible demands” (Butler 2011:193).

The analysis of the direct democratic initiatives—as they emerged throughout the 2011 cycle of global protest—in response to this crisis of representative democracy remains relatively indeterminate, however. This indeterminacy reflects the reality that everyone, including participants, is still struggling to make sense of what is being created. In any case, to date, little ethnographic description and analysis is available of the specific forms of direct democratic practice enacted in 2011 in settings as distinct as the Casbah in Tunis, Tahrir Square in Cairo, Syntagma Square in Athens, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Tel Aviv’s tent city, and the Wisconsin statehouse as well as the encampments in New York and Ljubljana that are our focus.

This article is therefore, first and foremost, an initial ethnographic account of the emergent practices of what Barbara and others called the “democracy of direct action” within Occupy Slovenia—or “150,” as it was more frequently called in Ljubljana, after the October 15 founding of the encampment and associated activities. Though my collaboration with Slovene activists dates to Noborder camps that
Andrey and Barbara helped organize in 2001 and 2002, it is worth stressing that this article was written in the midst of the intense cycle of protest it describes and midway through a stint of fieldwork that began in July of 2011 and that continued after the final submission of this article in early January 2012. My research confirms claims (Graeber 2011; Juris this issue; Klein 2011) that there are important continuities and discontinuities between the forms of direct democracy at encampments like OWS and those that characterized the alter-globalization movement. There are continuities, in part, because activists like Andrey and Barbara were first politicized within the alter-globalization movement of the early 2000s and have helped to transfer the practices of this period to a new generation of activists involved in Occupy Slovenia. We argue, however, that it was subsequent struggles—especially those carried out in solidarity with minority and migrant activists during the 2000s—that shaped the unusually decentralized and minoritarian direct democracy adopted in Ljubljana, which was distinct from practices developed elsewhere during 2011. This article is also, therefore, comparative, tracing the specific history of Occupy Slovenia and teasing out its implications to facilitate an assessment of the democracy of direct action vis-à-vis the consensus-based decision making of OWS, about which much more has been written to date (Gessen et al. 2011; Graeber 2011; Juris this issue).

Such an approach contributes to the growing anthropology of democracy (Appadurai 2001, 2007; Brown 2006; Creed 1998; Nugent 2008; Paley 2002, 2008; Shore 2000). Our focus on direct democracy, which has been relatively neglected within anthropology (cf. Albrow 2006; Graeber 2009; Maeckelbergh 2009), responds to David Nugent’s (2002, 2008) call for an unsettling of “normative democracy”—that is, the dominance of a certain liberal variant of democracy—through a description of “alternative democracies,” especially those unique conceptions of democracy emerging among subaltern peoples that allow us to think outside dominant assumptions (Paley 2008). Such a critical reevaluation of democracy is all the more urgent in postsocialist Europe, which has been the target of far-reaching “democracy promotion” (Creed 1998; Verdery 1996; Wedel 2001) and attendant “civil society building” for two decades (Brown 2006; Coles 2007; Hemment 2007; Junghans 2001; Raiza 2007; Sampson 1996). The current wave of Slovene activism, which attempts to radicalize democracy, invites an ethnographic approach both because it refuses official spokespersons and representatives of its practices and because it shifts democracy to the terrain of daily life. Here, then, we offer a preliminary description of these experimental new ways of enacting democracy and reimagining the political.

We begin by giving a detailed account of the texture of the democracy of direct action as experienced in the daily assemblies of Occupy Slovenia. Of particular importance is the way that the democracy of direct action, with its empowerment of decentralized workshops rather than the central assembly, encourages new initiatives, even initiatives that the majority of those at the assembly might not actively support. We then turn to the recent history of social movements in Slovenia because the practice of the democracy of direct action has developed out of activists’ experience and knowledge, produced through a series of migrant and minority campaigns during the 2000s. Indeed, according to movement participants, it was experiences of majoritarian direct democracy in the form of referendums against minority rights, and the difficulties activists encountered in opening spaces for the agency (protagonizem) of migrants in a context in which citizenship and the state were increasingly defined in ethnonationalist terms, that led to the adoption of a minoritarian decision-making model within Occupy Slovenia. This decision-making process ensured a space, they claimed, for action by those who belonged to marginalized minorities or held minority political positions and thereby also facilitated the dynamic expansion of the movement by encouraging participation, innovation, and initiative.

Finally, we describe the Workshop for Direct Social Work, as one example of the kinds of collective action grounded in personal experience that was facilitated by the democracy of direct action. Direct Social Work created spaces for encounter and collaboration among those with distinct and, in this case, often antagonistic positions—for instance, social workers and those officially called “users” (uporabniki) of social services. Central to this process of “rebuilding society from below” was mutual transformation, what one woman who was involved with Direct Social Work’s activities described to me as a process of becoming-other-than-one-now-is (postajajoč-drug-kot-si-sedaj) through encounters with difference. This theme of becoming came up repeatedly around Occupy Slovenia.

In conclusion, we reflect on the distinct challenges and opportunities that the direct democratic practices of Occupy Slovenia pose for ethnographic research, theorizing, and writing. Most immediately, the rapid developments surrounding the Occupy Everywhere movement demand that anthropologists write more quickly and write in, with, around, and against the news (Hannerz 2002:69). Beyond such temporal emergence, we consider the ways that Occupy Slovenia is producing emergent forms of life (Fischer 1999, 2003) and is even self-consciously engaging in a process of becoming (Biehl and Locke 2010). This emphasis on becoming, furthermore, offers an opportunity to extend the ways that direct democracy and direct action have been theorized to date (Day 2004; Graeber 2002, 2004, 2009, 2011; Juris 2008; Paris 2003; Shantz 2003). In particular, rather than emphasizing the prefigurative qualities of direct democracy—that is being the change one wants to see in the world—we consider the shift toward the
politics of becoming-other-than-one-now-is, toward forms of open-ended subject making that are embedded in and constitutive of collective struggle (Hardt and Negri 2009:367; cf. Biehl and Locke 2010).

Before turning to a consideration of the democracy of direct action, a few words on collaboration, pronouns, and writing styles. As Michael M. J. Fischer has noted, emergent forms demand partnership, conversation, and contestation with “insiders of all sorts” (2003:58)—in this case, innovative practitioners of direct democracy—and we have endeavored to leave the traces of our mutual engagement throughout this text. Andrej, a professor of political theory at the University of Ljubljana and a committed practitioner and proponent of militant politics, has been actively involved in radical activism since the 2000 IMF protests in Prague. Over the past dozen years, he has helped to build transnational networks around Zapatismo, European social centers, and precarity as well as migrant university struggles, and he has organized locally within antiracism, labor, squatting, and migration movements. Maple, a U.S. citizen, began collaborating with antinationalist and antiwar initiatives in the former Yugoslavia in 1991, when, as an exchange student in Belgrade, he witnessed the violent dissolution of the country. He has participated in and documented activist movements in the United States (Razsa and Velez 2002) and former Yugoslavia and has conducted years of ethnographic fieldwork with anarchist networks in Zagreb (Razsa 2007; Razsa and Velez 2010) as well as with the campaigns that Andrej has helped to organize in Slovenia.

Although the ethnographic “I” indexes Maple, as it does in the NLB teach-in above, it emphatically does not craft him as an objective observer or privilege anthropological theorizing in this collaboration. Indeed, we are committed to collaboration for a number of reasons, not least because it is more consonant with the anti-authoritarian politics of the movement we are describing. What is more, it is important that collaboration extend to coauthorship, to allow us to manage in common the valuable resource of access to international English-language publishing, which has come to dominate professional advancement in postsocialist Europe over the past decade, often at the expense of the kinds of public engagement that characterize Andrej’s work.7

Though he does not share Maple’s preoccupation with the anthropological tradition, Andrej is not indexed primarily in the third-person singular because he plays any traditionally conceived anthropological role as consultant on his lifeworld and culture (Lassiter 2006). On the contrary, we want this text to document the ways that his political analysis and theorizing are directly tied to his radical engagement, are, in fact, the product of activist reflection and knowledge production embedded in ongoing struggles. The activism of Occupy Slovenia that Andrej has helped develop has all the qualities of what Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus (2008) describe as “para-ethnography,” both in drawing on participants’ daily conditions and lived experience for its critical analysis and in its highly developed and reflexive understanding of its role in the world.8 The existential insights provided by our subjects, as well as their own analytical acumen, may require us to defer to their modes of knowing (Holmes and Marcus 2008; cf. Rappaport 2008). This article proceeds, both in the relationship between the coauthors and vis-à-vis other movement participants, in just such a spirit of epistemological humility, “by deferring to, absorbing, and being altered by found reflexive subjects—by risking collaborative encounters of uncertain outcomes” (Holmes and Marcus 2008:84). We leave traces throughout of these encounters between coauthors and with others, in which the anthropologist is, as in the teach-in at NLB, jostling among other voices attempting to make sense of and give sense to social life as it unfolds. So, like other anthropologists who have explicitly engaged becoming, we recognize the provisionality of our account (Biehl and Locke 2010) as well as the very collective practices of “liberation struggle” they describe. Indeed, by keeping such provisionality front and center, in both our methods and our writing, we offer one model of what an anthropology that valorizes becoming might look like.

The democracy of direct action in the daily assemblies

“Gathered first at the squatted Social Center Rog. Sound system and generator ready on our rickshaw” (Večer 2011). These lines open a collective diary written by Occupy Slovenia participants and published in a leading daily a week after Occupy Slovenia was initiated.9 They continue their narration of the movement’s beginnings as follows:

We have the sense there are enough of us, enough experiences from past struggles, to create an unforgettable demonstration. We have planned Occupy Slovenia to be the foundation of a liberation movement that can translate our needs into unconditional rights. We are not waiting for capitalism’s apocalyptic end but building an uncompromising movement for rights and common welfare now. [Večer 2011]

Like Occupy Movement activists elsewhere (Graeber 2011; Juris this issue), Ljubljana’s radicals were surprised by the response their call to action elicited:

There is a crowd on Congress Square. 5000 people. Nobody expected this. Sound system too weak. At first glance the crowd is mostly composed of individuals without organized groups. The legacy of the 20-year monopoly of “democratic parties” over political life. We open the microphone. People are stepping forward to share their hardships, their lack of future. Yesterday’s teach-in at the bank has, it seems, already initiated
The buoyant tone of the diary reflects the expansive mood of activists who—after years of organizing alongside migrant and minority groups in Slovenia, organizing that led to the marginalization of activism and even, at times, its public vilification—find radical activism to be much more popular suddenly. They understood this newfound public support in relation to a political disorientation in Slovenia. The goals that oriented public life for two decades—economic liberalization, European integration, and democratic consolidation—had lost their self-evidence in the face of the political and economic crisis.

The media was especially receptive to the swirl of direct actions associated with Occupy Slovenia. On many occasions, those actions generated dozens of news articles, sometimes occupying several of the first slots on the evening news, even in the midst of the election campaigns for imminent parliamentary elections. Journalists—and many others, Andrej suggested—were well disposed to Occupy Slovenia because they could increasingly see that their own working and living conditions were characterized by the social and economic precarity the protests denounced. Activists who had struggled with the political consequences of nationalism for more than a decade responded to their newfound popularity with an insistence on a transnational rather than national framing:

On the way, protests from abroad are heard. Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, New York, Tunis, and Argentina are echoing in our chants. Que non nos representan! De-gáze! This is what democracy looks like! Que se vayan todos! And the Slovenian refrains. No one represents us! Money to people, not banks! We will not pay for your crisis! [Večer 2011]

By stressing “No one represents us,” “Real democracy now,” and “Que se vayan todos” [They all must go], as well as bemoaning the consequences of the “monopoly of ‘democratic parties’ over political life,” activists positioned Occupy Slovenia as a response to a crisis of representative democracy in Slovenia.

In front of the stock exchange protest becomes resistance; demonstration becomes assembly. The letter “R” is knocked off Borz (Stock Exchange) and a “J” is inserted to spell Boj za (The Struggle for . . .). With television broadcasting live, the assembly decides to occupy. We have broken with the dictates of financial capitalism and representative politics. We are building a movement based on principles of direct democracy and direct action—horizontally, in network form. We will liberate our strivings, our desires. [Večer 2011]

Again, by positioning themselves in front of the Stock Exchange rather than addressing national institutions, either symbolically in a historic space like Congress Square or literally before parliament, as protest traditionally has in Slovenia, activists sidestepped the state and directly engaged financial institutions, not, it should be noted, as a populist defense of the local against foreign capital. On the contrary, many activists embraced the ways that the financial crisis brought them together with movements elsewhere struggling against financial institutions. Finally, activists marked a transition from protest—which objects to current conditions and is often directed toward making requests of powerful actors—to resistance with the formation of the assembly, a collective body that enables activists to decide and act together.

One assembly (škupščina) I attended in late November 2011 provides a sense of the dynamics of these gatherings, of the decision-making process within the democracy of direct action as well as the forms of political action that have come to define Occupy Slovenia. Tjaša volunteers for the role of recorder (zapisnikar), who takes notes and posts them on 15o.si. A voice from my left nominates Marko, 31, to facilitate the proceedings by asking, “You’ve never been moderator, right?” Indeed, as he recites aloud the rules that structure the assembly—as is done at the beginning of each gathering—Marko struggles. The crowd of 50, now in a tight circle, teases him when he forgets the second of only three agenda items considered at each assembly: camp logistics, workshop reports, and miscellaneous. Marko reminds everyone that the assembly does not decide the content of workshops (delavnice)—that is the autonomous prerogative of the workshops themselves. When Marko pauses too long, others in our circle call out the rules: Raise your hand to speak, wait to be acknowledged by the moderator, respect the expression of others, and, if you have already spoken, defer to those who have not yet had a chance to express themselves. Do not engage in dialogue with others, especially if this means criticizing the proposals of others, but instead propose your own action—and only an action that you yourself are willing to participate in and help organize. Be concrete. Propose the idea for a workshop and announce when and where it will meet. “So, in short,” continues Marko, catching his stride, “it’s direct democracy. Everyone present participates.”

Turning to camp logistics, we discuss the kinds of issues that might arise among roommates or within the context of any extended campout: lost sweater, main tent opening hours, organization of night watch, how to handle late-night drunkenness, smoking in main tent, and wet sleeping bags to be collected and hung to dry. Irfan,
56, speaks next. With his graying mustache, it is easy to imagine him as the dignified yet surly socialist-era waiter he was until he was “erased” in 1991. He reports on Occupy Slovenia finances: €26 ($33) in donations, €18 ($23) in outlays, leaving a total of €136 ($172). There is a brief discussion of buying a higher grade of kerosene for the space heater so the walls of the main tent—as well as the lungs of those who spend time there—will not be covered in the kind of fine black soot that I blew from my nose last night with some consternation.

A number of workshops report back to the assembly on their activities. Emil, 51, a migrant worker from Bosnia, reports from the Workshop for the Workers Dormitory Rent Strike. He describes the difficulties former employees of Vegrad, a large construction firm that has been in bankruptcy for nearly 11 months, are having with the management of the company-owned dormitory. Vegrad owes back pay of between €5,000 ($6,340) and €15,000 ($19,020) to these workers. These debts, unlike those of the company’s creditors, Slovenia’s major financial institutions, Emil explains, are not to be paid from the bankruptcy fund. What is more, the court-appointed trustee is insisting the workers continue to pay rent to the dormitory or face eviction. The workers have responded that they should be able to stay on, subtracting the rent from the back pay they are owed. They have declared a rent strike. If evicted, however, those with permanent residence risk losing social rights such as health insurance, and those with temporary residence face deportation. Do you have a workshop proposal? Yes, please come to a meeting at the dormitory at 8 p.m. on Tuesday to plan action against the management.

Other announcements? “Yes,” Andrej speaks up. “The Workshop against Precarity and for Common Welfare met on Sunday with families who have been, or are in the process of being, evicted from their homes by Raiffeisen [Bank].” Living in Slovenia’s poorest region, Prekmurje, most have already paid back the loans with interest, Andrej explains, but they have not managed to pay off the high fees and penalties they were charged during periods when they were unable to make payments. Mostly impoverished peasants, many with a foot in wage labor of one kind or another, they contacted the workshop after seeing coverage of the teach-in at NLB on national television. Andrej describes planned direct actions, under the name Days of Indignation Against the Banks, culminating in an action to move one family back into their home. “We will demand the writing off of their debts. This is a crucial turn in our struggle,” he continues, “in which we can begin to open direct conflicts with financial institutions and begin to establish new relations of force.”

“Any questions?” asks the moderator. “Yes,” responds a clean-cut man in his mid-thirties. “These people should also take some responsibility for these loans. We should be avoiding these financial institutions, boycotting them instead of borrowing from them.” “That’s neither here nor there now,” retorts Andrej, “and it’s impossible in today’s era to get ahead without credit. These people took relatively small loans for necessary expenses and they were forced to put up their homes as collateral.” As the back and forth continues, with escalating intensity, the moderator intervenes to remind the two interlocutors that they should not be “dialoguing”; comments should be addressed to the assembly.
“Anyway,” the moderator continues, addressing the clean-cut man, “unless you have a fundamental ethical objection to what they’re planning, you should just get involved in the workshop. Otherwise, propose your own damn workshop!”

The specific decision-making practices that constitute the democracy of direct action and are seen in its daily assemblies have a number of political implications. To clarify these practices, it is helpful to first contrast them with those of OWS—and by OWS, we are referring specifically to the encampment in Zuccotti Park in New York City, as movements in other U.S. cities have adopted varied models of organization. At first glance, the democracy of direct action, as embodied in the assembly, appears quite similar to those direct democratic practices adopted by OWS, comprising the constituent elements of general assemblies and working groups—or assemblies and workshops, as they have come to be known in Ljubljana. In fact, the relationship between workshops and the assembly is reversed, which shifts significantly how decisions are made. In short, whereas at OWS all decisions need to be approved by modified consensus at the general assembly—that is, at least 90 percent approval after all objections have been heard and addressed by facilitators (#OccupyWallStreet New York City General Assembly 2011)—the assembly in Ljubljana was not Occupy Slovenia’s primary decision-making unit. Workshops, although they operated under the umbrella of Occupy Slovenia and reported back to the assembly, had autonomy to organize themselves in any manner they saw fit, implementing the internal forms of decision making they thought most appropriate. Workings groups at OWS, by contrast, were empowered only to develop proposals, which had to be approved through modified consensus at the general assembly. Participants in the general assembly sometimes numbered in the thousands, and proceedings lasted for many hours (Gessen et al. 2011), whereas assemblies in Ljubljana typically lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Our concern here is not primarily with efficiency, though it is not irrelevant, for, as Barbara quipped in late November, “It’s too cold for consensus.” More importantly, when I asked activists about their impressions of the democracy-of-direct-action model, two themes came up repeatedly: that the form empowered minorities and that it unleashed energies that were otherwise dormant or even actively blocked in their daily lives.

Migrants from various backgrounds were an important constituency within Occupy Slovenia. We address some of the historical reasons for the heterogeneous composition of the movement below. Here we consider ways that the democracy of direct action opened a space for minority participation, not only by ethnic or racial minorities (manjšina) but also by those with minority political positions or groups who had particular concerns that might not have any immediate urgency for the broader assembly, for example, those labeled “mentally ill.” When Andrej and I finally found time to sit down and discuss the implications of the democracy of direct action, I asked him why the practice was especially inviting for those who did not feel they belonged to the majority for one reason or another. He responded,

Well, it’s related to the same dynamic of empowering workshops and not requiring initiatives to seek majority endorsement. Emil, for example, can propose a workshop on his specific concerns at the workers’ dormitory without needing anyone’s approval. Or I don’t have to worry if that guy at the assembly doesn’t fully understand our approach to addressing evictions. The emphasis is on action by anyone who feels a workshop addresses issues of real concern to them. That’s the reason we ground these proposals in a willingness to participate in them, to take action. By design there is no overarching sovereign authority that would define the direction of this movement. And, hence, there is no authority that can determine that a minority’s position doesn’t represent Occupy Slovenia as a whole.

Activists’ antipathy to majoritarian decision making, which, for some like Andrej, extended to sovereignty itself, had implications both for the dynamism of Occupy Slovenia’s campaign and for the role of those who held minority positions.

Activists also often discussed the democracy of direct action’s capacity to unleash creative energies. As Andrej explained it, “The movement here in Ljubljana is similar in composition to [that in] Tunisia and Spain—a highly educated generation whose capacities to produce, to network, to express themselves are completely blocked.” In fact, Andrej and other activists from Ljubljana had gone to both Tunis and Barcelona in September to meet with activists and to share experiences and coordinate protests in preparation for the October 15 Global Day of Action—a day marked by protests in more than a thousand cities in 82 countries (Anonymous 2011), including the initiation of Occupy Slovenia. “What we envisioned, and what’s taken shape to a degree we’d hardly let ourselves hope, is an open framework in which people can develop new demands, new social rights. That’s why it’s important that people be able to pursue the projects they propose, assuming it’s an idea that can attract collaborators.”

As I became more familiar with the democracy of direct action, I felt that two critical issues about its practice kept arising, both related to the political coherence of Occupy Slovenia in light of its adoption of this model of organization. First, I pressed Andrej on the question of what the limits of political participation in Occupy Slovenia might be. That is, within the framework of the democracy of direct action, with power residing in the workshops, what would prevent initiatives that are fundamentally hostile to the movement from co-opting it? All workshops are to abide by the framing principles adopted when the encampment...
was declared on October 15, Andrej explained, by organizations like the Invisible Workers of the World, the Union of Crane Operators, Social Center Rog, We Are the University, and an Alternative Exists. These principles include opposition to financial bailouts and austerity, rejection of political representation, and contribution to the development of an autonomous movement and solidarity. When a leader of the Party of Youth-Greens (SMS-Zeleni), for example, tried to participate in the occupied Faculty of Arts Assembly as part of his party's pre-election campaign, Andrej continued, he was booed into silence and told not to return as a party representative, though he was welcome as a human being. How would the movement respond to a populist anti-immigrant initiative? “Look, first, you’ve seen how many migrant initiatives are represented here, the Erased, Invisible Workers of the World, and the workers dormitory strike,” Andrej responded, “so we’ve created a clear profile that is inhospitable to the politics of hate. But if force was needed to eject them from our midst…” In the final analysis, Andrej argued,

What is important is that the democracy of direct action does not establish some kind of general will of the people but seeks to make beneficial encounters possible. The assembly is the space that searches for commonalities among different workshops, to produce new common notions that would compose an expanded collective subject, not by majority principle but by keeping processes of empowerment of everyone directed towards expansion…. This means producing norms, like defense of minority positions, norms that ensure the process continues its expansive trajectory.

Second, I wondered what would prevent centrifugal forces from undoing Occupy Slovenia. Was there not a tendency for people to self-select into workshops of like-minded people? Was there not a danger, especially in light of the sectarian tensions that marred the alter-globalization movement in Slovenia and elsewhere, of groups spinning off from Occupy Slovenia and no longer returning to assemblies, no longer engaging with those who were different than they? Well, Andrej admitted,

this is a very real danger, and there have at times been signs of such centrifugal tendencies. We don’t know where this will lead. For the moment, however, I’d say two elements counter this tendency. First, in creating a camp in front of the Stock Exchange, we’ve clearly defined a common enemy, an enemy that many of us can link directly to the conditions of our daily lives, the nature of our employment, the debts we can’t pay. But second, that camp is also a common resource we are governing together. Not of course just the physical camp, though that is crucial. I mean we recently discussed the possibility of closing the camp because it’s just so exhausting to sustain it in this [late December] weather, but many felt that it was what linked us in some fundamental ways. And, from the discussion, it was clear that the camp was the physical manifestation of the broader common resource of the movement, the profile we’ve built publicly, but also the new forms of social relations we’ve produced collectively around that camp.

We turn now to the ways that previous struggles alongside minority groups inform the minoritarian orientation described here, an orientation that studiously resists any concept or practice of majoritarian rule.

A minoritarian history of social movements in Slovenia

Although many commentators on the Occupy Everywhere movement have noted its similarities to the alter-globalization movement (Klein 2011; Tarrow 2011), very few have described the actual organizational and biographical threads tying these two periods together or the significant shifts in activist practice that separate them. In the Slovenian case, understanding the struggles that preceded Occupy Slovenia—both in terms of their history and of the political lessons gleaned from them—is essential because they directly inform the development of the democracy of direct action. As in other Occupy movements, some activists in Ljubljana were first politicized in the globalization campaigns of the early 2000s, especially the transnational mobilizations against elite summit meetings in Seattle, Prague, Gothenburg, and Genoa. Indeed, in Slovenia there was a rapid succession of campaigns through the 2000s, beginning with the alter-globalization protests and quickly followed by campaigns against the invasion of Iraq and Slovene membership in NATO. But it was struggles over citizenship and belonging (Beznec 2008, 2009; Kurnik 2008, 2009) that came to dominate activist life through the second half of the 2000s and that left their stamp on the decidedly minoritarian practices of the democracy of direct action.

Although, in many regards, Slovenia has been held up as a success story—with the highest per capita income among formerly socialist states, it was the first to join the Eurozone—the struggles of minorities within the new state have shed a quite different light on Slovenia since independence. Following Yugoslavia’s collapse, the formation of an independent and ethnically defined state (Hayden 1996), and accession to the European Union, citizenship and migration became the most politically charged issues in Slovenia. In the past decade, public conflicts have erupted around a series of migrant populations: pre-independence immigrants from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia protesting their removal from the register of permanent residents, displaced Bosnians seeking
official status as refugees, asylum seekers pushing for greater freedom of movement pending hearings, undocumented migrants denouncing their detention conditions, and workers on temporary visas objecting to labor abuses. Slovenian popular discourse (Doupona Horvat et al. 2001) in many ways echoed the dominant scholarly representations of migrants either as a threat to receiving countries (Hirsi Ali 2006; Huntington 2004; Ye’or 2005) or as helpless victims of human rights abuses (cf. Cunningham 1995; Giordano 2008). Some migrants and activist allies in Ljubljana, many of them veterans of the alter-globalization movement, insisted that a different approach was needed. Indeed, in many ways, the concept of “insurgent citizenship,” a notion developed to describe the informal practices of residents in Brazilian favelas that “created new spheres of participation and understandings of rights” (Holston 2008:303), describes the creative ways migrants have managed to act politically even when they have none of the legal rights afforded to citizens.

Among the migration struggles in Slovenia, the self-described Erased were the most contentious and perhaps illustrate most clearly the background against which the democracy of direct action was developed. The 1992 removal (or “erasure”) of more than 25,000 people—primarily those born in other Yugoslav republics—from the register of permanent residents was not controversial at the time. Indeed, though more than 1 percent of the overall population of two million were erased, the public, including many of those affected, was unaware of the scale of exclusion that the act (depeša) of the minister of internal affairs produced until the Association of the Erased was formed in 2002 and began to challenge their status. The legal act of erasure transformed those affected into “illegal migrants” overnight in a territory where they had lived legally for decades or, in some cases, had been born (Blitz 2006; cf. Petrović 2011). Along with legal residence, the Erased lost medical care, work permits, pensions, even the ability to obtain a driving license or to travel outside Slovenia. Ethnic Roma were targeted disproportionately in the Erasure—some even deported to wartime Bosnia and their deaths (Zorn 2005)—because the law allowed a good deal of discretion by local clerks regarding who would actually be purged from the register. Except by a small number of formal NGOs and informal activist initiatives, the Erased were vilified in the national media, portrayed as a dangerous fifth column disloyal to Slovenia (Zorn and Lipovec Čebron 2008).

The Erased, like other politically active migrant groups, worked closely with a loose-knit web of allies, the more radical of whom gathered around the Social Center Rog, a social and political association housed in a former bicycle factory squatting since 2006. Some of these allies were activist researchers with one foot in the academy who envisioned their collaboration with migrants as a hybrid of activism and research they termed—drawing on the ideas of the radical Argentine Colectivo Situaciones (2009)—“militant investigation” or “militant research.” These activists encouraged the active participation of migrants themselves in research, seeking ways to valorize their protagonizem rather than emphasize their victimhood.25

And, indeed, despite the hostile atmosphere the Erased faced, their lack of legal rights, and personal experiences
of what one Erased activist called “ethnic cleansing by bureaucratic means,” their association pursued claims in such venues as the Slovenian Constitutional Court, the European Parliament, and the European Court of Human Rights (Beznec 2008). The Erased also organized an international solidarity campaign, sometimes coordinated with migrant initiatives elsewhere in Europe, including that of the sans-papiers in France, and continually worked to ensure that their predicament was at the center of public debate. Despite this protagonism, the Erased confronted painful social realities in the course of their political struggle.

First, the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) organized a popular referendum on the Erased in 2004, which provided another opportunity for public attacks on Roma and “Southerners” (južnjaki), those born in republics of the former Yugoslavia other than Slovenia. Ultimately, although participation was quite low, some 95 percent voted against the Erased (Zorn 2004). Second, in this politically charged atmosphere, NGOs such as the Peace Institute, with its origins in the wave of activism in late 1980s Slovenia (Mastnak 1992, 1994) that contributed to the drive for Slovene independence (Kuzmanić 1994; Stubbs 1996), pursued a quite different approach than those emanating from Social Center Rog. They advocated on behalf of migrants, seeking to speak for them in public and legal settings and therefore to mediate their relationship with the state. As Andrej lamented, “Many of our early efforts to build new forms of power with migrants were contested by civil society organizations, which always attempted to impose themselves as mediators for the marginalized, representing them as helpless victims rather than allowing them to articulate their own politics.”

These experiences, both of the dangers of majoritarian politics and of the sense that certain forms of organization and advocacy stifle the initiatives of the most marginalized, led radicals to develop the democracy of direct action as a framework that allowed for encounter and collaboration among varied initiatives under the Occupy Slovenia umbrella but nonetheless maximized the diversity and protagonism of individual initiatives or workshops within Occupy Slovenia.26 To be clear, our earlier contrasting of the democracy of direct action and consensus models was not meant to imply that decision-making practices like those adopted by OWS do not protect the rights of minorities. Indeed, consensus processes, which require the consent of those who hold minority positions, can be quite effective in protecting minority voices—though this is less true of modified consensus. Within the framework of the democracy of direct action, however, it is possible to act from minority positions, even to take actions that may not be popular among the majority.

After looking over the above history we had written, Andrej was left with the nagging sense we had neglected something essential about the quality of the democracy of direct action and what had motivated its development. To be sure, the above history demonstrates why activists would be decidedly ambivalent about majoritarian and populist accounts of the Occupy Movement. So, even though the slogan “We are the 99%” was sometimes heard in Ljubljana, it always had unwanted nationalist overtones for those of us who spent years working alongside Slovenia’s 1%—the Erased. Similarly, statements like those OWS issued in the name of “the people, united” (#OccupyWall-Street New York General Assembly 2011) had unwanted...
nationalist overtones for activists in Slovenia. For Andrej, invoking the people (narod) always implied the forging of new sovereignties that might, in turn, either exclude or hierarchically include those marked as minorities.

But all this, Andrej complained, makes the democracy of direct action sound as if it is only a reaction against the dangers of sovereignty—hard lessons learned from discrimination. For us, however, it is also a positive affirmation not only of the marginalized and the minority but also of minoritarian politics as the organization that will be expansive and ever more inclusive rather than disciplining or normalizing those who participate. At the center of this organization is the figure of the minoritarian as a universal figure, in the Deleuzian sense of becoming everybody and everything.

Workshops and the politics of becoming

By late November, a multitude of workshops were meeting in many places—the cities of Maribor and Koper, the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Social Work in addition to Boj za. There were individual workshops on the “Bible and Social Criticism,” “For a Better Old Age,” “For Media Relations,” “For Improving the Camp,” “For the Blockade of the Humanities Faculty,” and “For Action against the Detention and Treatment of People against Their Will.” Activists argued that the relative autonomy of workshops, especially as compared to the OWS model, as well as the emphasis on the proposer being prepared to contribute to his or her proposals, encouraged action, innovation, and diversity. Of course, as Barbara was quick to point out, “Many initiatives wither on the vine. The workshops that captured people’s imaginations,” she elaborated, “but that could also be put into action, were the ones that grew.” We turn now to the description of one workshop to provide a sense of the kinds of concrete activities that were taking place in these forums.

I heard much praise for the Workshop on Direct Social Work—especially the participants’ “Occupy Psychiatry” action, in which they invited patients to speak in front of the Ljubljana Psychiatric Clinic about the violence and humiliation they faced while institutionalized. I also met those associated with Direct Social Work at other actions and at the assembly. I had not previously been to one of their meetings.

We gather inside the large military-grade tent. The ten of us sit around a table opposite the kitchen and push stacks of books from the library against the side of the tent to make room. We are not far from the smoky kerosene heater that has drawn most assemblies inside now that the temperature has dropped below zero.

At first I am confused about the close collective reading of the Law on the Exercise of Rights to Public Resources (Zakon o uveljavljanju pravic iz javnih sredstev) that we are carrying out. Vito, a professor of social work in his mid-fifties, seems to have the most comprehensive understanding of the law and many questions are directed to him. Marta, a student of social work in her midtwenties who is facilitating the workshop, is nonetheless careful, when multiple hands are raised, to select others to speak first, especially, it seems to me, the three people who would officially be called “users” of social services. There are four other students around the table as well as Gregor, formerly a junkie, now an activist on issues surrounding drug policy. Another workshop he participates in, the Workshop to End Prohibition, recently held a “smoke-in” at the Ministry of Health to protest the lack of access to medical marijuana. Gregor clearly has a sophisticated understanding of the rules—and the loopholes—of Slovenia’s social safety net. He discusses his strategy of using a community organization with which he is associated to register the homeless as residents of Ljubljana. Legal registration of one’s address is a constant challenge for those who are homeless, and legal residence is the font of all social rights, including access to the national health care system.

Despite constant interruptions—especially a steady trickle of homeless who enter and exit the tent, usually greeting members of the workshop with great familiarity—we continue to do a fine-grained reading of the statute. Why is it so complicated to assess what constitutes an “adequate and appropriate apartment” for children? Why does individual social assistance max out at €230 ($290) when the legal maximum is €450 ($570)? (We are occasionally forced to raise our voices because activists associated with Anonymous are having an animated debate at the other side of the tent about technical issues with our live-stream feed, which broadcasts video of our direct actions and assemblies.) How is your assistance level adjusted if you have a small pension? How does someone access housing assistance from the municipality? Users explain their struggles in navigating these questions, especially in the face of the obfuscation of administrators at various offices. Slowly, from this morass of bureaucratic questions, from numerous wandering accounts of personal experiences with social workers, the logic of our inquiry emerges. These direct social workers, that is, all those gathered here, are amassing the costs—institutional, financial, social, and personal—for the current system of state controls associated with each kind of transfer payment.

The argument that is emerging is that the regulations in place serve to prevent many from accessing the funds they are entitled to, that the controls often cost more than they save, and the social assistance that is given is therefore significantly smaller than it could be because of this bureaucracy. The relationship of social workers to users, moreover, already one of discipline and stigmatization rather than collaboration—as both social workers and users in the workshop testify from their distinct experiences—is
The workshops thus serve as spaces or the development of for policy changes ad-
ally, in its “big tent.” These activities have now been folded into Occupy Slovenia, often taking place, quite liter-
ment” or “feeling.”

cial in its original sense of the term as “common senti-
consensus, especially in the original sense of the term as “common senti-
cooperation described above are highly unusual. Through the process of dialogue, common study, and reflection—as well as weekly direct actions—those who participate build a new intersubjective understanding and consensus, especially in the original sense of the term as “common senti-

Well, you have to understand the specific practices of becoming we’re developing here. It’s not just about bringing people together and hoping they change. Direct Social Work struggles to transform social relations in dialogue with the concrete conditions in which people find themselves. That’s why participants, whether social workers or users, have to speak from their own experience. That’s why I complain, for example, about the way the new laws have a disastrous effect on my ability, as a social worker, to speak with users. So, sure, at some level there are contradictions. How could there not be? These are the contradictions of the lives we live today. We need to start from within these contradic-
tions, not some other place we wish we lived.

What Marta was laying out, in other words, was a belief that the process of changing one’s circumstances begins with a critical description of the limits and frustrations of one’s current predicament and continues with the struggle to change this predicament. Through this critical yet empirical analysis—carried out collectively, in a time and place of their own choosing—Direct Social Work participants have in essence already embarked on the transformation of these conditions and their social relations. “Anyway, [beginning from the actual circumstances we find ourselves] isn’t just some philosophical point,” Marta added later,

it’s a very pragmatic one. If you want to work with a homeless person whose only income, besides what he manages to beg or steal, is a small welfare payment, how can you not address the actual consequences of this welfare and its relationship to state institutions? Are you going to criticize [the homeless] for addressing their concerns to the state? Good luck with that one.

I later discussed Marta’s comments with Andrej, ask-
ing him to grapple with the same questions about demands
addressed to the state and, in particular, his own frequent references to rights. “Doesn’t this inevitably lead,” I asked, “into the alienation characteristic of representative politics that you so vehemently reject? The anarchists I’ve worked with in the past, for example, would never have engaged in such a language of rights, such direct engagement with the state.” “Well, Marta is right, I think, to acknowledge the contradictions we find ourselves lodged within. There is, after all, no position outside of power relations from which we might act. It is possible, however,” Andrej insisted, to use a discourse of rights without falling into state-centered politics. There is no necessary contradiction, in fact, between claiming rights while trying to construct stateless sociabilities and communities. Direct democracy for us means that we reject the transfer of rights and powers to any sovereign. So we have to find new ways to produce rights—by defining them such that we simultaneously build our power to realize them. This is a politics of small steps that accumulate new forms of alternative power that can be used in the war being waged globally by financial institutions, markets and the institutions of representative democracy against our generation.

In this sense, becoming in Occupy Slovenia is not understood as originating in some imaginary point of perfect freedom. It is more related to the Foucauldian notion of freedom as an expansive threshold…The goal of action is not freedom itself but processes of liberation, the struggle to resist the actual conditions in which we find ourselves today. In this sense, the process of producing together new claims, new rights like those that Direct Social Work articulates, is as important as the content of the rights.

What Andrej is describing is a radically different understanding of rights than one encounters within classical liberal theory (Kurnik 2011). What he envisions are not natural rights, God given or otherwise, which we have by belonging to the human race (human rights), or legal rights, which we have as citizens of a state, democratic or otherwise, that has guaranteed these rights constitutionally (civil rights). These are rights, instead, that are produced collectively, that we possess only insofar as we have the capacity to assert them socially, only insofar as we build together with others the collective capacities to exercise them. They derive, Andrej insists, from the Spinozan right of aggregated people who claim nothing less than the right of God, which is absolutely free (Spinoza 2002:683; cf. Speed 2008). Maybe this understanding of rights sounds nebulous, Andrej concedes, when pressed. “What would the right to housing look like concretely in our terms? Well, we’ve begun to challenge the banks’ authority to evict, as have the movements in the U.S. We should move on to squat vacant bank-owned properties and distribute them to those most in need. We will govern this resource in common together, assuring that empty homes don’t go unused. Hey, we love the Boj za encampment, but it should not be the best we have to offer the homeless.”

Whereas most activists movements would, of course, define themselves as seeking social change, Occupy Slovenia is one of those very rare social forms that is engaged in self-conscious processes of becoming-other-than-it-now-is in an open-ended manner, both in terms of encounters with difference and collective struggles against existing conditions (cf. Besteman 2008).

**Conclusion**

When he addressed OWS, Žižek declared that direct democracy is not a “universal solution.” In fact, as our account documents, far from being a universal template, direct democracy takes on quite different textures in the historically specific settings where it is emerging as a response to the broad crisis of representative democracy. Our purpose in comparing the democracy of direct action to the consensus decision making of OWS is decidedly not to promote one model over another but to make clear the distinct political practices and democratic imagination emerging in Ljubljana. The practices of OWS have been remarkable on a number of levels, far exceeding the expectations of those who contributed to their organization (Graeber 2011). Indeed, it may be in this moment of a global effervescence of direct action and direct democracy—as, to give only U.S. examples, Time declares “the protester” person of the year, direct democracy hand signals are used without requiring explication on network TV, and encampments have arisen (and been violently dismantled) throughout U.S. cities[34]—that it becomes possible and necessary to begin to ask more critical and nuanced empirical and comparative questions about the range of direct democratic practices that are emerging.

With humility and openness to collaboration, anthropology can contribute to what should be a rich public discussion of the varied practices and political implications of direct democracy. The need for further ethnographic research is particularly urgent and appropriate because direct democratic practice extends across the fabric of daily life and is inseparable from lived experience; it is, therefore, best studied with participatory and collaborative methods. After all, although we obviously differ from Žižek in our assessment of direct democracy, it is not simply that we dispute his dismissal of decision making like that adopted by Occupy Slovenia. His dismissal may or may not be proven correct by subsequent events. His position, however, is articulated from an epistemological perch that simply cannot grasp the actual texture and significance of direct democracy—at least, not after a single visit to OWS. These practices can only be known by asking how one’s own
The new research we call for must be done rapidly—that is, sometimes even in the midst of ongoing events, though preferably also drawing on earlier fieldwork—and therefore refusing one of the key ways anthropologists distance themselves from both their subjects and political relevance: temporally. Furthermore, when encountering collaborators whose practices are themselves already paraethnographic, anthropologists must be prepared to share ethnographic authority and question institutionally defined roles as fieldworkers by deferring to collaborators’ knowledge practices, indeed, by engaging in a process of becoming-other-than-we-now-are as ethnographers. Now, many would surely object that this is what good anthropology has always done—and I would not disagree. But there is a shift of degree here that is worth pausing to examine. Andrej is not particularly interested in the scholarly (and, even less, the anthropological) significance of the movements he is participating in. He would describe himself first and foremost as an activist—even as a committed revolutionary—and his thinking about this material is, therefore, primarily political. By entering into collaboration with him and the broader Occupy Slovenia movement—and cotheorizing or co-conceptualizing this movement (Rappaport 2008:4–5) with him—I break with the ethnographer’s traditional engagement with interlocutors. Andrej’s analytical and theoretical voice is fully present in this text, at times entangled with and at others eclipsing mine. Traces of this ethnographic becoming are evident throughout this text, not least in the moments of instability when the ethnographer’s analysis seems not to merge in unity but to at least intermingle with Andrej’s analysis and that of other movement interlocutors. By opening ethnography to such transformative engagement with radical practices, ethnography is itself refashioned for new political purposes.

Drawing on this collaboration, we turn now, in conclusion, to some preliminary political and theoretical reflections. We focus on the implications of the shift toward a minoritarian politics and the embrace of becoming as examples of the kinds of political and theoretical insights that we hope a broader ethnography of direct democracy will generate.

Occupy Slovenia has emphasized the decentralized and minoritarian empowerment of workshops and a more restricted role for the assembly as a space of encounter. The general assembly of OWS, by contrast, has functioned as a central organ of collective decision making. One account of these differences, one we have emphasized, runs through the experiences of Slovene activists—including those from stigmatized minority and migrant groups—who, having worked together in previous struggles against majoritarian ethnic nationalism, crafted democratic practices that are affirmatively minoritarian. This means in essence that they displace any notion of a popular majority, which is the nominal source of political authority within representative democracy and, indeed, of sovereignty itself. Although we trace these specific practices to activists’ encounters with the particularly stark violence of state formation and subsequent ethnonationalist majoritarian rule in the former Yugoslav, they have broader significance. First, the exclusionary (or hierarchically inclusionary) dangers of majoritarian democracy are not limited to newly formed postsocialist states; they have been evident, for example, in California’s democratic denial of rights to sexual minorities and noncitizens. Second, in its affirmative minoritarian ethics and practices, Occupy Slovenia gives us a glimpse of the contours of a living antiessentialist and antisoeverign democratic imagination—giving substance to theoretical elaborations of potential nonstate and nonidentitarian political forms, such as the one Hardt and Negri (2005) have described as “the multitude.”

Viewed in this light, the democracy of direct action allows us to extend the ways that anthropologists (Graeber 2002, 2004, 2009, 2011; Juris 2008, this issue) and others (Day 2004; Paris 2003; Shantz 2003) have theorized direct democracy over the past decade. A vein running through this scholarship, much of it informed by the practices and literature of anarchism, has been an emphasis on the prefigurative. David Graeber, for example, defines direct action as a rejection of a politics “which appeals to governments to modify their behavior, in favour of physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative” (2002:62, emphasis added). I found in previous fieldwork with radical activists, primarily anarchists, in Zagreb, Croatia, that this literature helped explain my interlocutors’ emphasis on how they were organized and made decisions—on their means rather than their ends. Such a shift toward means rather than ends also helped open up a critical analytical space, one desperately needed in a Croatian postsocialist context in which any criticism of capitalism was immediately associated with the discredited communist legacy of using repressive means to pursue nominally utopian ends (Razsa 2007; Razsa and Velez 2010). Croatian anarchists themselves understood their interventions in the urban landscape as embodying their political and ethical ideals: understood them, for example, to be modeling different social relationships than the acquisitive and competitive ones that were becoming dominant in neoliberal Zagreb.

To be sure, many actions of Occupy Slovenia could, and indeed were, understood as prefigurative of other political futures as well. Danijela, 24, for example, insisted that the creativity and diversity of initiatives on display at the assembly modeled the kind of collectively directed energies—
to collaborate, to communicate, to share—that capitalism not only cannot animate but also may even actively block.35 Similarly, Andrej spoke of the assembly as a concrete example of “our collective capacity to manage our own lives and reconstruct society from below.” To further complicate any rigid distinction between a politics of being and becoming, when my anarchist interlocutors engaged in direct action, they inevitably engaged in a process of becoming. One cannot fight neo-fascist youth, squat a community center, and face off against the police at protests without being transformed by the experience. Indeed, I would go so far as to say a good portion of my Croatian interlocutors’ activism centered on cultivating themselves as different kinds of subjects, as much as it was directed toward macropolitical change (Razsa 2007, 2009).

As these articulations of being and becoming are, therefore, inextricably entangled, what we want to highlight are the political and theoretical limitations of theorizing direct action and direct democracy as primarily prefigurative—especially the ways they limit our ability to explicitly analyze and even valorize the process of becoming. The shift in Ljubljana toward an emphasis on becoming highlights some of these implications. First, activists have explicitly tried to ground their critique, and the articulation of the possibilities of change in their current circumstances. from within the contradictory predicaments in which they now find themselves lodged. Rather than seeing direct action, as Graeber has described it, as the “defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free” (2011) or expressing hope in an eventual telos of freedom, activists around Occupy Slovenia are engaging in a messy, and, some activists stressed, never-ending liberation struggle. Second, the practices of Occupy Slovenia facilitate encounters with difference that allow for a becoming-other-than-one-now-is. In other words, the fruit of the democracy of direct action as political practice grows in unexpected ways from the soil of countless hours of dialogue, bickering, and common struggle—among social workers and users, precariously employed researchers and migrant laborers, students, professors, rent-striking construction workers, outsourced Bosnian dockworkers, and Erased waiters.36 Third, prefiguration implies that we know in advance what form struggles can take—which has echoes of a kind of utopian telos, no matter how near at hand. The practice of the democracy of direct action itself indicates that direct democracy must be conceived of as an open-ended process that will involve unexpected new forms. In this spirit, movement organization and decision making themselves must be submitted to critical reflection, must be opened up to a process of becoming. To quote L. A. Kauffman, the Occupy Movement “has opened up for questioning so much that was previously taken as given. May it do the same with its own methods” (2011:48–49). Finally, by opening up direct democracy toward becoming and by insisting that creative practice may rush ahead of theory, we can recognize the minor but important role that the ethnography of direct democracy can play in documenting, reflecting on, and contributing to a reimagined democracy.

Epilogue

At the beginning of January 2012, just before we submitted this article, Andrej and I sat down over coffee in Social Center Rog and had a last conversation that highlights the stakes of these struggles for Europe as he understands them. The EU debt crisis seemed to be deepening with each week, and there were increasingly credible reports about the unraveling of the European Union, a slow, grinding shift away from integration toward fragmentation into distinct tracks of EU and Eurozone integration (Marazzi 2011). We stayed close to the blazing woodstove, but I was nonetheless chilled by Andrej’s assessment of the urgency of activists’ efforts to reimagine direct democracy in relationship to the economic and political crisis.

Of course, we don’t know if what we’re doing will succeed, if it will be possible to build our collective capacities in an expansive way so we can confront this crisis meaningfully. But I often think about this in terms of the 1980s in Yugoslavia—the last time we found ourselves in a decentralized multinational state racked by a profound debt crisis and riven by the politics of austerity imposed by the IMF.37 What was known as civil society in those years—which included many strands that we can see in Occupy Slovenia today, radical social work, queer and feminist initiatives, antimilitarist and environmental activists—played a key role in undermining the authoritarian Yugoslav regime. But in the depths of the crisis, and, to be fair, they faced the threatening Milošević regime in Serbia in addition to the debt crisis, they retreated into a sovereigntist and national solution by putting their hopes in Slovenian independence. We need to do everything we can today to contribute to a European, transnational and global struggle to reimagine the political possibilities that the debt crisis presents, to propose radically different political solutions. If the looming nationalist turn in Europe, already so evident in the recriminations between, say, Germany and Greece, comes to pass, war is a certainty. [Europe] may continue on the economic course of ruthless austerity, a form of social war, or it may veer towards military conflict as Yugoslavia did.

Andrej’s comments might strike one as overly dramatic, but they call to mind a central banker’s recent account of the Eurozone crisis. The anonymous banker reportedly confessed “that he has lately been thinking about historical catastrophes such as the first world war and wondering how the world blundered into them. ‘From the middle of a crisis’ he says ominously, ‘you can see how easy it is to make mistakes’” (Economist 2011).
Notes

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1. Nonetheless, in his animated speech at OWS, Žižek went so far as to declare the “holy spirit” present in the encampment, embodied in the “egalitarian community of believers who are linked by love for each other, and who have only their own freedom and responsibility” (2011a) with which to pursue their goals.

2. There is a good deal of controversy around NLB, which is considered a financial pillar of the Slovene economy. The state-owned bank now requires recapitalization because of stricter ECB (European Central Bank) rules on cash reserves. Recapitalization with public funds is extremely unpopular in Slovenia, especially because of what are known as tycoon (tajkun) loans. Banks gave credit under “friendly” terms to Slovene oligarchs, which enabled them to consolidate their ownership of important companies. With Europe’s current economic crisis, those loans have gone sour and the banks now face huge losses (Damijan 2009). NLB, in its previous incarnation as Ljubljanska Banka, is also perceived by many in other former Yugoslav republics as having stolen deposits during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It renamed itself Nova Ljubljanska Banka in the process (Pirc 2006).

3. Indeed, when he was asked about the future of OWS, Žižek told those assembled in New York, who had become a symbol of consensus-based direct democracy, that “participatory democracy is not the universal answer,” arguing that such political forms are impotent in the face of large-scale social problems. “The left,” he concluded, “should also drop certain taboos: discipline, hard work, following orders on things on which we agree can be positive and important” (Žižek 2011a).

4. We have chosen to use the name Occupy Slovenia here because it is the one Slovenians used for their activism when comparing it with or linking it to the Occupy Everywhere Movement in the United States, which we do extensively here.

5. This quality was of particular importance for minority participants in Ljubljana. For accounts of the complicated relationship between the U.S. Occupy Movement and people of color, see Juris this issue and Lim 2011.

6. Both the Direct Social Work approach and the earlier teach-in at NLB were grounded in personal experience, which, Andrej argued, reinforced the democracy of direct action in three ways.

First, it grounded our demands in our own knowledge and experience: it ensured that it was empirical, that is, it corresponded to social reality. This, in turn, was the basis of our political authority—to speak and act on our own behalf, on what we know. Finally, by speaking in terms of both personal experience and personal willingness to take action, activists avoided the abstractions of (often sectarian) analysis.

7. For more on the complexities of collaboration with social movements, see Edelman 2009.

8. And research, or “militant investigation,” as it is often called among activists in Ljubljana, has been central to the Invisible Workers of the World, which began with collaborative research within workers’ dormitories in Slovenia and expanded to engagement with migrant workers in a wide variety of labor settings (Beznec 2009; Kurnik 2009; Mozetić 2009).

9. Initially Véčer, the third-largest Slovene daily, invited Andrej to write a personal diary of the first week of Occupy Slovenia. He proposed, instead, a collective diary, and activists who had been involved in organizing actions gathered at Social Center Rog to compose it. Activists broke into groups chronicling different days of the week. Sitting around the large central table, they then edited together and synthesized the varied voices and emphases of the different constituencies present before publishing under the collective name of 15o. As many of the activists present had worked together previously with the Invisible Workers of the World and coauthored many collective political statements, the process of negotiating the relative weight of different perspectives and understandings was one that—though never easy—had been honed through years of common experience.

10. See the Occupy Slovenia website (http://www.15o.si/index.php/si; hereafter 15o.si) for an extensive selection of this media coverage.

11. Although networking and social media tools were highly visible within Occupy Slovenia, few activists placed a very strong emphasis on them or saw them as playing a particularly influential role in movement dynamics (cf. Juris this issue). Most indicated that Twitter, for example, was useful primarily as a newsfeed, as a way to keep up to date on what was happening within movements elsewhere. Common Twitter hashtags include #Revolucija15o, #Bojza, and #OccupyLjubljana. The Revolucija 15o Facebook group (revolucija15o@groups.facebook.com) was quite active in updating those who were already involved. Websites remained important, especially 15o.si, which hosted a wealth of photos, video, workshop schedules, statements, press releases, media coverage, and so on. The website of the Invisible Workers of the World (http://www.njetwork.org) also hosted a great deal of content related to Occupy Slovenia.

12. The practice of deferring to those who have not yet spoken, like nominating those who have not yet done so to serve in the role of moderator, is part of a widely dispersed repertoire of anti-authoritarian mechanisms that help ensure that minority voices are not shunted aside and that the skills of participation are learned by all.

13. Winter in Ljubljana posed a serious challenge for the existence of Occupy Slovenia’s camp. Activists managed to equip the camp somewhat for the cold by erecting large military-grade tents with space heaters, enabling assemblies and workshops to be organized there. As we write in early January, however, only a few people still sleep in the camp. The encampment, or boj za (the struggle for), was declared, Andrej pointed out, as a common public space whose existence depends on broader social support—not on a group of determined activist campers. The camp is therefore watched over with pickets, rotating night watches, and those attending daily workshop meetings and assemblies and not primarily through a residential presence. Andrej insisted, for example, that the camp was not meant to be a space in which...
activists suffer for society’s ills—that is, “not to be the bad consciousness of society but to be the public hub of the movement’s self-organization.”

14. “The financial crisis in Slovenia was felt most acutely in the construction industry. Since the crisis began, major construction firms like SCT and Vgrad have collapsed. The biggest social cost of the crisis was eventually paid by migrant workers who make up 10 percent of the active working population and were vastly overrepresented in construction. The massive unemployment and subsequent deportations of migrant workers from Slovenia during the crisis are the direct consequences of a migration regime that fosters the personal dependency of workers on employers.

15. Emil also points out that eviction would mean that workers would no longer be able to pursue their legal demands against the bankrupt firm. He implies that this might provide added incentive to evict them.

16. Parts of the movement in Greece, France, and Spain have embraced the notion of “indignation” in the face of the economic and political crisis, especially as a response to the calls for austerity. In some contexts—particularly France, where the popular book Indignez-Vous! (Hessel 2010) has been a common reference—the media has often referred to movements that started in Maghreb and came to Europe with the May 15 movement in Spain as fostered by “the indignant.” As these movements erupted in large part outside of civil society organizations and existing political organizations, the notion of “indignation” as “the raw material of revolt and rebellion” (Hardt and Negri 2009:236) seems a quite appropriate appellation.

17. The nature of the crisis of the tentative self-organization and the reasons for directly confronting financial institutions became clearer at a morning meeting in the upscale Opera Bar. In preparation for the campaign around evictions, Andrej and I sought out an informal consultation with a member of the Social Democratic Party (SD) who holds an important position in the Ministry of Finance. “Boštjan” explains the government’s perspective on the banking crisis and the recapitalization that is being proposed at the European level, especially for state-owned NLB in Slovenia. As Occupy Slovenia has been among the leading stories in most national news broadcasts, even as we enter day 46 of the occupation, Andrej asks if the protests have been discussed at the Ministry of Finance. No. “Well,” Andrej follows up, “since the elections are less than a week away, have there been any discussion of how the proposed bailout of banks might be perceived by voters?” “No, within the government all eyes are on the response of the credit markets to our various proposals. Just this week we’ve managed to reduce the rate for ten year bonds to 6.8 from the rates over the dangerous 7 percent threshold that pushed Portugal and Ireland to seek bailouts.” This, Andrej tells me later, is one more face of the democratic crisis. The organs of representative democracy themselves are captured by financialization, not only in the undue influence of the financial sector, as reflected in the cozy relationship between firms and lending party officials, but also in the very fundamental orientation of political leadership away from the electorate and toward the financial markets.

18. Some may decide for consensus decision making, as have anarchists active in the Workshop Why Go to the Elections?

19. A spokes council system was later organized to streamline decision making about “operations,” that is, the life of the encampment, and was empowered to make some decisions without seeking consensus in the general assembly, though this move was quite controversial (Gessen et al. 2011).

20. A friend who was very involved in the general assembly process of Occupy Boston lamented that consensus came to be the rule among those with endless amounts of time. “I’d go because there was some issue I really wanted to address, but I’d eventually have to go back to work. I mean and I didn’t even have kids or a 9 to 5 job.” See Kaufman 2011 for a history of consensus decision making and critical reflection on its limits.

21. The following reflection by a U.S. exchange student, who participated in activism for the first time at the NLB teach-in and who came to be highly involved in Occupy Slovenia, highlights the ways that the democracy of direct action invited participation, empowered, and was highly effective at transferring movement knowledge horizontally:

For me, as a new activist and immature in my politicization, the democracy of direct action helped illuminate and clarify some of the fundamentals of the struggle… the democracy of direct action also facilitated my steep learning curve as it unleashes the knowledge of more experienced activists in organizing and articulating the struggle… Finally, the democracy of direct action empowered me to consider myself and my interest in the movement and from there propose my own workshops (on the political dynamics of the crisis and collecting narratives within the camp). [Brown 2011]

22. Transnational networking in Europe has been persistent yet nonetheless highly volatile. Since the first cycle of alterglobalization struggles, such transnational networking has been important to Slovene activists. The activism of the late 1990s and early 2000s led to the development of the EuroMayDay, No Border, and Frassanito networks. During the campaign for migrant workers’ rights that started in the framework of Invisible Workers of the World in 2007, activists based in Social Center Rog also established cooperation with a network of activists and researchers from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the period of the last four years networking among the so-called new generation of social centers connected Slovenian, Italian, and Spanish social centers. The meetings in Tunisia and in Barcelona were the product of networking around university struggles in the framework of the Knowledge Libera Front and gave birth to a new network spanning the Mediterranean called “Reseau des Luttes” (Network of Struggles). Additionally, collaboration across the border between Slovenia and Italy was reanimated in early January 2011 by common actions of Occupy Ljubljana and Occupy Trieste in the form of a playfully serious march of the “Clown Army.”

23. Until the recent crisis shook confidence in Slovenia’s capacity to repay debts, it was almost universally represented as a success story, whether in scholarship (Ramet 1998), the media (Wood 2005), or official reports (U.S. Department of State 2011).

24. The ethnic definition of the Slovene state was initially contested by center-left members of parliament, who promoted a more civic vision of political community in which Slovenia was the state of its citizens, not the state of the Slovene nation (narod). The ethnic definition of the state, as seen in the preamble of the 1990 Constitution, came to be increasingly dominant in legal and political life through the 1990s: “Proceeding from… the basic and lasting right of the Slovene nation to self-determination and from the historical fact that Slovenes have, over centuries of struggle for national liberation formed their national identity and established their own statehood, the Parliament of the Republic of Slovenia enacts the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia” (see Hayden 1996:791). For a more complete account of the ways that initial civic articulations of Slovenian statehood were displaced by more ethnonationalist ones as well as the ways that citizenship came to be defined in an ethnically exclusionary manner, see Zorn 2009.

25. A good example of such initiatives was the worker-led monthly radio broadcast “Visa for the future” (“Viza za...
26. Andrej develops this point, saying,

The claim for direct democracy in Occupy Slovenia is not an attempt to democratize the existing representative democracy with additional practices of direct democracy. Neither is it an attempt to substitute representative democracy with direct democracy in the framework of the nation-state. We could easily agree with the argument of our friends from the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] movement that direct democracy within the existing political framework, namely, the nation-state, would mean the tyranny of the majority.

27. The minoritarian as a “universal figure,” as articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, describes quite closely the practices of the democracy of direct action, as the one that addresses powers (puissances) of becoming that belong to a different realm from that of Power (Pouvoir) and Domination. Continuous variation constitutes the becoming-minoritarian of everybody, as opposed to the majoritarian Fact of Nobody. Becoming-minoritarian as the universal figure of consciousness is called autonomy. It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary; rather, by using a number of minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming. [1987:106]

28. This strain of radical social work is, in fact, a tradition that stretches back to the 1980s and even 1970s, complicating the generational story we told above. As Rea Maglajlić and Paul Stubbs have argued:

An emphasis on user participation in socialism enabled and encouraged the creation of citizen associations, including those of people with particular disabilities. Such associations provided mutual aid throughout the [post–World War II]-period and particularly during the 1980s. Some of these, in alliance with social workers, began to yield the first radicalized practices just prior to the war. “The society for the protection of madness” was initiated in 1989 by junior social work academic staff, radical practitioners and service users in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the Republic which had seen a growth of self-styled “social movement” activities throughout the 1980s … Traces of this radical practice remained in Slovenia and elements of critical theory, if not yet of practice, spread to neighbouring Republics. Unfortunately, the wars caught up with social work before its more politicised elements could develop on a larger scale. [in press]

29. Vito Flaker, one of the organizers of Direct Social Work, described its origins in the following manner: “Direct Social Work was born out of a necessity to seize the opportunity that Occupy Slovenia provided for social work to reclaim its original mandate and responsibility to people. Occupy Slovenia has also given an opportunity to social work to rearticulate the social engagements that were present in Radical Social Work in the seventies.”

30. For a discussion of the ways that financial expropriation and the politics of austerity have led to a turn toward community-based unionism in Wisconsin, including struggles over the terms of social reproduction, see Collins 2012.


32. When I asked Andrej to elaborate on how direct democracy was a response to the crisis of representative politics, he stated that the claim for direct democracy is related to the crisis of representative democracy, which lost its legitimacy, on the one hand, for its subservience to the dictates of financial markets and, on the other, for its monopolization of decision making. For this reason, we do not criticize representative democracy only for surrendering to the financial markets but also because it serves as a machine for the alienation and expropriation of our power and rights. It is in this sense that we see representative politics as homologous to financial capital. So the understanding of direct democracy in the movement is closely related to the refusal to allow our powers to be alienated from us and centralized elsewhere. Direct democracy within the movement is, therefore, fundamentally a practice of decentralizing power, its redistribution throughout society. That’s why, in our practices of empowerment there is no delegation of power. This seems to be the only possible answer to the crisis of representative democracy and the only antidote to the populist instrumentalization of direct democracy.

33. As Spinoza wrote,

So from the fact that the power of natural things by which they exist and act is the very power of God, we can readily understand what is the right of Nature. Since God has right over all things, and God’s right is nothing other than God’s power insofar as that is considered as absolutely free, it follows that every natural thing has as much right from Nature as it has power to exist and to act. For the power of every natural thing by which it exists and acts is nothing other than the power of God, which is absolutely free. [2002:683]

34. See Juris this issue for more on the posteviction politics of the U.S. Occupy Movement.

35. “All the different workshops that have been sparked by the diversity of direct action,” she argued, “show that there is all this pent up social productivity that capitalism blocks, simply can’t make use of or is afraid of. The mobilization of these forces shows this waste, actually demonstrates it.”

36. At the end of long and at times heated discussion, in which I found myself repeatedly defending prefigurative politics of direct action, Andrej asked,

Do you know why I have grown to dislike the Slovene word for comrade [tovar, related to the word tovarna, or factory, but with associations of tovar, or heavy load]? It implies some kind of brutal toil, of carrying a heavy load. The Bosnian one, drug, captures so much more of what direct action should be about. Besides “comrade” it means “friend,” of course. But it also means “the Other,” right? I go into this struggle being open to the fact that I’ll be changed by working with people who are different than me, who’ve been screwed by capitalism in ways that are quite different than the way I’ve been screwed.

37. See Woodward 1995 for an extensive description of the role of the debt crisis and structural adjustment in the unmaking of Yugoslavia.
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