Occupy Montreal and the Politics of Horizontalism

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Direct democracy and non-hierarchical modes of organization – in a nutshell, horizontalism – are among the defining features of the anti-austerity protests that many countries have experienced in the last few years (Castells 2012; Cruells and Ibarra 2013; Fernández et al. 2012; Glasius and Pleyers 2013). Some authors even claim that these features, as embodied in the model of the assembly, prefigure “the possible infrastructure of the common” and represent a point of convergence for left-wing forces (Thorburn 2012: 256).

Why do activists adopt such horizontal and participatory organizational forms rather than another? And how do they settle on a particular form of horizontalism rather than another?

This chapter addresses these questions by looking at the case of Occupy Montreal. The latter involved the occupation of Victoria Square, in the financial district of Montreal, from 15 October to 25 November 2011. Instead of assuming that the horizontalism of Occupy Montreal is simply the product of an alleged crisis of representative democracy or a spontaneous diffusion effect of the Spanish Indignados or Occupy Wall Street (which had begun a month earlier, on 17 September), this chapter argues that we need to problematize horizontalism and treat it as the uncertain and temporary outcome of a political process. Participants in Occupy Montreal permanently improvised and gradually defined the organizational form of the occupation through trial and error. Furthermore, their understanding of the assembly evolved as the occupation unfolded, to the extent that many of them ended up having mixed feelings and holding preferences different from the ones they held initially.

In order to substantiate this argument, this chapter first presents Occupy Montreal, highlighting particular events and some basic characteristics of the occupiers. Second, it briefly discusses two ways of accounting for horizontalism – the continuity hypothesis and the diffusion hypothesis – and then introduces a third hypothesis that focuses on the politics of

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horizontalism. Finally, it analyzes the case of Occupy Montreal from the standpoint of this last hypothesis and elaborates on the practical and contingent nature of horizontalism.

This chapter is partly based on ethnographic and participant observation during the entire length of the occupation of Victoria Square, in the financial district Montreal, from 15 October to 25 November 2011, and a few assemblies that followed the eviction. Although I never spent the night at the encampment, I spent between 10 and 15 hours a week at the occupation and attended many general assemblies. On 29 October 2011, I also conducted a survey on the site of the occupation with the help of 12 other interviewers, mostly graduate sociology students from McGill University (where I was teaching at the time). Our two-page survey questionnaire combined multiple-choice and open-ended questions. We interviewed 74 persons out of approximately 250 occupiers present that day. We tried to select interviewees randomly while wandering around the site but faced obvious sampling problems. Insofar as urban occupations are open and public spaces, people are free to come and go throughout the day and night. It follows that the people wandering around the site, attending general assemblies, and/or spending the night can vary continuously. Sampled interviewees could have been regularly attending general assemblies or spending the night on the site, but they may have stopped doing so right after the interview. Inversely, some participants may have joined the occupation after we conducted the survey and thereby changed its demographics. There are no clear boundaries and fixed qualities that can be used to identify the population to sample from. There is thus no way of knowing for sure whether our sample of 74 is representative of the larger population. Our sample should only be seen as a snapshot of a significant segment (about 30 per cent) of the population present on 29 October, exactly two weeks after the beginning of the occupation.

After the occupation ended, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews between December 2011 and February 2012 in French and English with key informants who had played a central role in different dimensions of participation/attendance varied from about 3,000 people during the first weekend (15-16 October 2011) to about 75-100 in the last days preceding the eviction of 25 November 2011.

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2 We built on the method developed by Mayer, Favre, and Fillieule (1997). I wish to thank the following people for helping me design and conduct the survey: Jason Carmichael, Leslie Cheung, James Falconer, Katy Fallon, Sara Hall, Ilju Kim, Alex Mochnacki, Anahi Morales Hudon, José Ignacio Nazif Muñoz, Alessandro Olsaretti, Pablo A. Quintanilla Bedregal, Marie-France René, and Kalyani Thurairajah. Special additional thanks to Leslie Cheung for producing the Excel spreadsheet.

3 Participation/attendance varied from about 3,000 people during the first weekend (15-16 October 2011) to about 75-100 in the last days preceding the eviction of 25 November 2011.
the occupation: in the facilitation of assemblies, in the media committee, in maintenance or infrastructure operations, etc. Each interview lasted between one hour and a half and six hours and were transcribed and coded4. I focused primarily on the occupiers’ background and trajectory as well as experience and understanding of the occupation. Although a few occupiers I interviewed had a little activist background, most of them were complete beginners and experienced the occupation as a life-altering event.

**Introducing Occupy Montreal**

On 15 October, 2011, in response to a call to action from the Spanish Indignados, people took to the streets and occupied public squares in more than a thousand cities throughout the world.5 It was almost a month after the beginning of the occupation of Zuccotti Park next to Wall Street, and exactly five months after the occupation of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, which initiated the mobilization of the Indignados in Spain (or 15M, for 15 May). In Montreal, activists started to plan the occupation in late September. A Facebook page that called for a brainstorming and planification assembly was created, and there were five assemblies prior to the occupation.6 The main topics addressed were initially the logistics of the camp/occupation,7 the ‘diversity of tactics’ – an old issue that had been at the center of the global justice movement since the late 1990s and early 2000s – and the decision-making process of the assembly itself.

From the very beginning, people participated essentially as individuals rather than members of organizations. In this respect, the dynamic of the movement fit what Juris has called a logic of aggregation rather than one of networking:

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4 I wish to thank Marc-André Cyr and Sean Waite for transcribing the interviews.
5 However, a map of these occupations indicates that the bulk of occupations took place in Western, developed countries. See http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/oct/17/occupy-protests-world-list-map.
6 The assemblies took place at the agora of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) in downtown Montreal and in the surrounding area (at Émilie-Gamelin Square and the café L’Escalier).
7 Throughout this chapter, I use the words ‘occupation’ and ‘camp’ interchangeably. ‘Camp’ refers to a ‘protest camp’ as defined by Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy: “a place-based social movement strategy that involves both acts of ongoing protest and acts of social reproduction needed to sustain daily life” (2013: 12; italic in original).
Whereas networking logics entail a praxis of communication and co-ordination on the part of collective actors that are already constituted – including particular organizations, networks, and coalitions (cf. Fox 2009) – logics of aggregation involve the coming together of actors qua individuals. These individuals may subsequently forge a collective subjectivity through the process of struggle, but it is a subjectivity that is under the constant pressure of disaggregation into its individual components. (2012: 266)

This feature was pervasive throughout the occupation. It fostered an inclusive dynamic that brought together people that were not part of militant organizations and were thus not mobilized through pre-existing and more institutional channels. As Juris has pointed out, the use of social media like Facebook and Twitter before and during the occupation was critical in this respect:

Rather than generating organizational networks, [social networking] tools primarily link and help to stitch together interpersonal networks, facilitating the mass aggregation of individuals within concrete locales through viral communication flows. In this sense, rather than mobilizing ‘networks of networks’, the use of Twitter and Facebook within social movements tends to generate ‘crowds of individuals.’ At the same time, (...) social networking sites (...) have lower barriers to access and participation, and thus penetrate wider social networks, helping to explain the broader degree of participation in the #Occupy movements beyond the traditional activist communities involved in movements of the recent past. (ibid: 267)

Following this logic, Occupy Montreal was more diverse and inclusive than previous activist protest events but also more subject to fragmentation or dissolution. Sustainability was thus a critical challenge, even more than in other types of mobilizations and social movements.

The first weekend of the occupation was dominated by an ecstatic aura. On the first day, about 3,000 people showed up at Victoria Square.

8 In Occupy Montreal, Facebook was significantly more important than Twitter (see Table 7.1).
9 Victoria Square is located at the intersection of Beaver Hall Hill and McGill Street, across the street from the old stock exchange (Montreal no longer has a stock exchange), the headquarters of the media multinational Québecor, and the World Trade Center. It is made of two strips, one with a long, rectangular fountain and the other with many trees. It is in this latter strip that the
to participate in a chaotic general assembly (GA), which made only two decisions that day: renaming Victoria Square as ‘People's Square’ (Place des peuples) and interrupting the assembly to join a demonstration that was starting from the square. The second day, fewer people showed up but the number of tents began to increase significantly while the assembly got to business and engaged in a lengthy and tortuous process of meta-deliberation (deliberating on the rules of deliberation) that lasted more than a week. During the first ten days, occupiers held a GA on a daily basis. These assemblies lasted several hours and had the effect of attracting passersby as well as consolidating the core group of participants. GAs would begin at 6pm so that full-time workers and employees could attend and participate in the decisions. By late October, the GA decided to meet only thrice a week: on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.

It would be impossible to summarize all the events and everyday struggles that shaped the evolution of the occupation. The practical management and logistics of the camp were a central issue from the beginning, but their importance kept growing over time as occupiers had to deal with homeless people looking for food and shelter, pressure from the police and the City of Montreal, cold weather, etc. The main management issues were the food supply, sanitation, and security. During the entire occupation, there were activities and actions organized in or initiated from the camp: workshops and training sessions, protest actions in the surrounding financial district, demonstrations starting from or passing by the camp, etc. Although there was a demonstration on the very first day of the occupation and many occupiers participated in the 3 November protest against the G20 Summit in France, the most important protest event was arguably the student march on 10 November. Heralding the intense mobilization that would take place only a few months later during the so-called ‘Maple Spring’ (see Ancelovici and Dupuis-Déri 2014), between 15,000 and 30,000 students on strike stopped by the People's Square to celebrate the occupation and invite the crowd to join the march. The latter then ended up at neighboring McGill University, where a group of students occupied an administrative building, leading the University to eventually call in the riot police.

A few days after this demonstration, on 15 November, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) camp in New York City was evicted, and a coordinated wave of camp evictions began throughout North America (in the United States as well as Canada). The Montreal police increased the pressure on local kitchen was located and most general assemblies were held, at the bottom of Queen Victoria statue.
occupiers, and rumors of an imminent eviction began to circulate. On 21 November, some occupiers decided to take the lead. In the early afternoon, members of the media committee of Occupy Montreal held a press conference and announced that they were leaving the camp. The statement had not been discussed at the GA, but the media immediately announced the end of the occupation. This situation fostered even more tension and conflict in the GA. The media committee was asked to attend the GA the next day to explain its statement, and the GA decided to continue the occupation regardless of the media committee or pressure from public authorities. But on Friday 25 November at 8am, approximately 300 police carried out the eviction of the camp. A few hours later, there had been 14 arrests and the occupation was over.

As in all protest camps associated with Occupy and the Indignados, Occupy Montreal was organized around the GA and a series of working committees that functioned like horizontal affinity groups accountable to the GA. There was a facilitation committee, a media committee, a kitchen committee, a philosophy committee, a security committee, an alliance committee, and so on. Each committee was relatively autonomous, but information tended to circulate between the GA and committees rather than across committees. It follows that each committee was not necessarily aware of what other committees were doing – thereby undermining the overall coherence of the occupation and potential synergies – and that the GA was the ultimate instance of legitimate power and decisions. Nonetheless, the structure and governance of the occupation represented a genuine effort at building a non-hierarchical, horizontal, and democratic micro-society according to a prefigurative logic.10 It involved not only a particular, inclusive decision-making process but also egalitarian social relations. Hence the reference to ‘horizontalism,’ as opposed to simply ‘direct democracy.’ The other potential reference could be anarchism, but I will not use it here because it implies a radical anti-capitalist stance that was not present in the discourse of the Occupy movement.11

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10 Prefiguration refers to a desire to practise and experience one’s values and principles in the struggle. It implies that the means and the ends are mutually constitutive and that one cannot build an egalitarian and democratic society through hierarchical and authoritarian means. On prefiguration, see Breines (1989 [1982]), Maeckelbergh (2011), and Polletta (2002).

11 The reference to ‘horizontalism’ is inspired by the experience of neighborhood assemblies in Argentina (see Sitrin 2006, 2012). For a discussion of anarchism in Occupy, see Aragorn! (2012b) and Graeber (2013).
Finally, Occupy Montreal shared some demographic characteristics (see Table 7.1 below) with other instances of Occupy in North America. For example, as in OWS, most participants in Occupy Montreal were male, white, and under the age of 30. More specifically, 75.6 per cent of surveyed occupiers were male, and 58.8 per cent were under 30. As in OWS, there was a strong orientation toward center and center-left political parties: while in New York City 33.8 per cent of occupiers identified with the Democratic Party (Milkman et al. 2013: 16), in Montreal 39.4 per cent of occupiers identified with Québec Solidaire at the provincial level and at the federal level 29.4 per cent identified with the New Democratic Party and 11.7 per cent with the Greens. However, non-identification was much stronger in Montreal than in New York: while in the latter 20.6 per cent of respondents did not identify with any party, in the former this number reached 47 per cent at the federal level and 51.5 per cent at the provincial level. But the main difference between Occupy Montreal and OWS was socio-economic. In New York City, 80 per cent of occupiers had a bachelor’s degree or higher and 37 per cent had an annual household income above US$100,000 (ibid: 10). In Montreal, only 25 per cent had a bachelor’s degree or higher and only 2.1 per cent had an annual personal income above CAN$50,000 (66.6 per cent had an annual

12 All the data about Occupy Montreal cited here is based on the survey that my students and I conducted on 29 October 2011 (n = 74). For demographic data on Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York City, see Milkman, Luce, and Lewis (2013). Milkman, Luce, and Lewis’s data is based on a survey conducted on 1 May 2012, nearly six months after the eviction of OWS: “We surveyed a total of 729 people who took the time to attend the May 1 rally and/or march, more than half of whom were ‘actively involved’ in OWS. The results include a demographic profile of New York City Occupy participants and supporters, along with data on their political identities, organizational affiliations, and previous activism, and on the specific concerns that led them to support OWS. Although some participants in the march attended because of their affiliations with unions and immigrant rights groups, nearly all of survey respondents (97 per cent) responded affirmatively when asked, ‘Do you consider yourself a supporter of the Occupy movement?’” (Milkman et al. 2013: 3). In order to make Milkman, Luce, and Lewis’s data relatively comparable to mine, here I refer to the category “Actively involved respondents” of their survey rather than to “all respondents” because the latter includes outside supporters whereas my own data only looks at people on the site of the occupation.

13 The contrast between male and female activists was not as high in New York City, where male activists made up 54.8 per cent (Milkman et al. 2013: 47). As I mentioned earlier, my survey data is to be treated with caution, as it suffers from several sampling problems. However, it does give us a relative sense of the crowd present on the site of the occupation on the day of the survey insofar as we interviewed 74 people out of approximately 250 (that is 30 per cent of the population). Most people surveyed did not provide information on their ethnic or racial identification. My claim that most participants were white is only based on observation during assemblies and actions throughout the occupation and I cannot provide a specific number.

14 The provincial and federal levels were treated as two distinct questions.
Similarly, while in New York City only 8 per cent of occupiers were unemployed (ibid: 47), this number reached 40.7 per cent in Montreal. Accordingly, participants in Occupy Montreal were on average significantly less educated, less employed, and poorer than the protestors in OWS. Finally, it is worth pointing out that in Montreal, 23.5 per cent of income below CAN$15,000).\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, while in New York City only 8 per cent of occupiers were unemployed (ibid: 47), this number reached 40.7 per cent in Montreal. Accordingly, participants in Occupy Montreal were on average significantly less educated, less employed, and poorer than the protestors in OWS. Finally, it is worth pointing out that in Montreal, 23.5 per cent of income below CAN$15,000). Similarly, while in New York City only 8 per cent of occupiers were unemployed (ibid: 47), this number reached 40.7 per cent in Montreal. Accordingly, participants in Occupy Montreal were on average significantly less educated, less employed, and poorer than the protestors in OWS. Finally, it is worth pointing out that in Montreal, 23.5 per cent of income below CAN$15,000). Similarly, while in New York City only 8 per cent of occupiers were unemployed (ibid: 47), this number reached 40.7 per cent in Montreal. Accordingly, participants in Occupy Montreal were on average significantly less educated, less employed, and poorer than the protestors in OWS. Finally, it is worth pointing out that in Montreal, 23.5 per cent of income below CAN$15,000).

\textsuperscript{15} Milkman, Luce, and Lewis's study (2013) mentions household income but does not include any information about household composition and whether all adults in the household work. In contrast, my data refers to individual income and does not include any information about household income.
surveyed occupiers had participated in a demonstration or rally, 9.1 per cent had organized one, 13.5 per cent had participated in a strike, 21.7 per cent had voted in political elections, and 23.5 per cent had signed a petition. Thus, the great majority of participants had limited or no prior experience of activism. This is another indicator of Occupy’s capacity to attract people beyond pre-existing activist networks and institutional channels.

Accounting for Horizontalism

In the Occupy movement, the occupation of public squares was not merely a tactic; it was also a claim about the virtues of civic participation and a demand for more democracy. Workers occupy workplaces, students occupy universities, citizens occupy public places. Furthermore, the word ‘occupy’ was applied to a great variety of objects – Occupy the Hood, Occupy Our Homes, Occupy Theory, etc. – to refer to the desire to regain control over something through active, grassroots participation. In Europe, although the language was slightly different, similar practices and organizational forms seemed to be at play. How did activists settle on a given organizational form and set of practices rather than another? And did activists actually settle on something, or were these practices and form simply transient equilibria?

Although a systematic comparative analysis of the practice of horizontalism in different settings would be necessary to address these questions, we can nonetheless problematize horizontalism and treat it as an outcome to be explained rather than a given or spontaneous feature. Unfortunately, social movement studies do not provide many leads in this respect. As Della Porta and Rucht (2013: 2) have pointed out, “what is actually happening ‘on the ground’ is rarely studied – namely, what the internal and mostly unspectacular life of social movements looks like, what movement groups do in their routine meetings, what they discuss and how, and the ways in which they take decisions. (...) social movement studies have devoted little attention to democracy within movements themselves”. This being said, the practice of horizontalism can be treated as the expression of a movement culture, that is, a shared set of understandings and modes of action. Put this way, it is possible to formulate two non-exclusive hypotheses that I call the continuity hypothesis and the diffusion hypothesis.

16 When they engage in street protests, workers and students also occupy public spaces. However, as soon as they step out of their workplaces and universities, they intervene also (and perhaps primarily) as citizens.
The Continuity Hypothesis

The continuity hypothesis questions the ‘newness’ of movements and stresses continuity with prior waves of mobilization. As several scholars (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly) have noted, social movement do not come out of nowhere. They build on pre-existing social networks, organizations, and know-how generated during previous contentious episodes and sustained over time. Furthermore, the particular ways in which people act together are both constrained and enabled by the existing repertoire of collective action, that is, the historically specific set of available routines to which people turn when acting collectively (cf. Tilly 1995). These particular ways of acting together also include an organizational dimension, as people fall back on what they see as legitimate forms and models that they adapt to circumstances and to the reactions of adversaries and allies (cf. Clemens 1996).

If we follow this logic, the practice of horizontalism in the Occupy movement represents the actualization of legitimate pre-existing routines and organizational forms. Several scholars have argued that the global justice, anarchist, and other radical movements have thus shaped the Indignados and Occupy movements. For example, the anarchist collective Aragorn! (2012a, p.i) stresses the continuity with anarchism: “Anarchists have been involved in every aspect of this phase of the movement. (...) We have brought people, ideas, and methodologies that have infused the Occupy Movement with a potent energy.” According to Romanos (2013), the 15M (that is, the Spanish Indignados) was not a spontaneous movement but built instead, through a learning process, on the discourse, structures, and work of previous mobilizations against precariousness and austerity as well as on the global justice movement (GJM). Similarly, Graeber (2013: 23), an anthropologist and anarchist activist who participated in the GJM and OWS, presents the Occupy movement as an extension of horizontal practices that had become commonplace during the GJM: “We’d had enormous success transforming activist culture itself. After the Global Justice Movement, the old days of steering committees and the like were basically over. Pretty much everyone in the activist community had come around to the idea of prefigurative politics.” As Graeber acknowledges, however, these practices have to be adapted to local circumstances and can, therefore, include an idiosyncratic dimension. For example, Razsa and Kurnik (2012: 240) argue that the practices and particular organizational form of Occupy Slovenia, in Ljubljana – based not as much on the GA or consensus model as on decentralized workshops that can develop initiatives that the GA would not necessarily support – were inspired by the GJM but
also, and more importantly, by local struggles for minority and migrant rights during the 2000s.

The continuity hypothesis suggests that the horizontalism of Occupy Montreal – and that of other occupations in North America and Europe – is not really puzzling. It was actually to be expected, for it had already been practiced for many years in radical activist networks (anarchist, feminist, and others) in Quebec before the wave of occupations began. This perspective has a lot of traction and is a welcome note of caution for observers and commentators who see novelty in every wave of protest. Moreover, it does not close the door to innovation. As Tilly (1995) and Tarrow (1995) have emphasized, the concept of repertoire does not imply that nothing changes but rather that change takes place primarily during contentious episodes and that innovation is bounded. The continuity hypothesis can thus accommodate what was one of the most visible novelties of Occupy and the Indignados, namely the occupation of public squares. It is not that activists had never engaged in horizontal practices before; it is that they had almost never engaged in such practices in public squares. According to Romanos,

One of the novel aspects of the 15M movement was the way it placed experiments with new forms of democracy in the centre of public space. In this way, the movement brought practices of deliberative democracy – previously confined to more or less limited spaces such as social forums, social movement headquarters, peace camps and social centres – out into public squares, where passers-by were invited to join in. This seems to be an important difference from the practices of previous movements and mobilizations. (2013: 211)

Therefore, one could make the claim that Occupy Montreal embodies a form of bounded innovation within the limits of a particular activist culture that made such developments relatively predictable.

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17 On the anti-authoritarian and anarchist political culture in Quebec, see Sarrasin et al. (2012). On the anarchist movement in Quebec, see Bellemare-Caron et al. (2013). On the prefigurative practices of the radical feminist group Nemesis, see Kruzyński (2004).

18 It should be noted, however, that there were a few instances of horizontal occupations before the Occupy movement. In New York City, there was such an occupation in July 2011; it was called ‘Bloombergville’ and denounced the austerity budget of Mayor Bloomberg. According to Graeber (2013), several participants in Bloombergville participated in the first organizing meetings of Occupy Wall Street. In Canada, although there had not been occupations of public squares as such, there had been instances of camping in front of the parliament to make demands. Thanks to Francis Dupuis-Déri for bringing this last point to my attention.
Although such an account is intuitively appealing and cogent, it faces an empirical problem. As my survey indicates (see Table 7.1), the great majority of participants in Occupy Montreal had no prior activist experience. Only 23.5 per cent had attended a march or rally, and only 13.5 per cent had organized one before the occupation. Put differently, almost 80 per cent of the occupiers had absolutely no prior activist experience. The same pattern shows up in the semi-structured interviews that I conducted with key players in the occupation. This raises the question of how exactly the pre-existing activist know-how and culture were transmitted from one wave of mobilization to the next. In this respect, Occupy Montreal was different from, say, OWS and the Spanish Indignados, where key players had been active in prior movements and a particular know-how was sustained in social centers (cf. Romanos 2013). Moreover, more experienced global justice and anarchist militants who could have infused Occupy Montreal with ideas and know-how, as Aragorn! (2012a) argues, did not play a significant role. Indeed, many simply looked down on the occupation. For example, members of the Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles (CLAC) – one of the main anarchist groups of Montreal and active in the global justice movement, among others19 – attended some meetings and GAs of Occupy Montreal but were put off by the latter’s relatively positive stance toward the police. Moreover, the CLAC did not seem to see the point of the occupation and believed it was an end in itself rather than part of a broader strategy. As a result, CLAC activists did not participate in Occupy Montreal.20

But even if anarchists had participated in the occupation, it is not clear that they would have supported the particular form of horizontalism that came to be in Occupy Montreal. The latter was heavily structured around the GA, and the ability of the different committees to make decisions autonomously – that is, without requiring the approval of the GA – was a constant object of endless debates. Anarchists and radicals sometimes favor a different, more decentralized and informal form of horizontalism. For example, Graeber argues that:

Consensus process only works if it is combined with a principle of radical decentralization. [...] It’s always better, if possible, to make decisions in

19 The CLAC (Convergence des luttes anticapitalistes) was created in 2000 to coordinate the mobilization against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in April 2001 and, after a few idle years in the second half of the 2000s, re-assembled in 2010 to mobilize against the G20 in Toronto. It was still active in 2016. See http://www.clac-montreal.net/.
20 Interview with a CLAC long-time activist, 27 April 2012.
smaller groups: working groups, affinity groups, collectives. [...] One should not feel one needs authorization from anyone, even the General Assembly (which is everyone), unless it would be in some way harmful to proceed without. [...] As a general rule of thumb: decisions should be made on the smallest scale, the lowest level, possible. Do not ask for higher approval unless there's a pressing need to. [...] what the GA is doing when it approves a working group is empowering it to act in the name of the GA. It’s basically a form of delegation. [...] once the work has been divvied up, or once an existing group has been authorized to pursue some project, there comes the question of how often one needs to check back for approval. The general rule really ought to be: only when it’s obvious it would be wrong to do otherwise. (2013: 227, 229, 232)

Similarly, Leach (2013: 184) has pointed out that OWS had such a particularly complex structure that some activists talked about the “bureaucracies of anarchy”. She notes that some social movements engaging in horizontal practices are structured differently – for example, the radical Autonomen movement in Germany:

Whatever collective decisions need to be made during actions are made by consensus, either in ‘full gatherings’ (Vollversammlungen [VV]) or in ‘delegate councils.’ As camps usually have no more than a few hundred people in them, the default form is the VV. [...] Importantly, however, very few decisions are made collectively during actions because there is less of an assumption that everyone needs to act together. Rather, each Affinity Group is free to act autonomously, as long as it does not endanger anyone else. (Ibid: 188)21

Anarchist activists that participated in the 2011 occupation of Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona go even further and denounce the GA as a mechanism fostering the homogenization of the occupation as well as new forms of hierarchy and domination:

21 Leach (2013: 187-88) presents the German Autonomen as “a militant, antiauthoritarian leftist movement that opposes all systems of domination (especially capitalism, fascism, and sexism) and practices what they call a ‘politics of the first person,’ which entails a commitment to nonhierarchical forms of organization and a rejection of the representational politics and vanguardist strategies of the traditional Marxist left. The Autonomen have been active in a broad range of leftist causes, most notably in the antinuclear, women’s, squatters, antifascist, and alter-globalization movements.” The Autonomen are part of the broader European autonomous movement. See Katsiaficas (2006).
The beautiful thing about the encampment in the plaza was that it had multiple centers for creation and initiative-taking. The central assembly functioned to suppress this [...] The central assembly did not give rise to one single initiative. What it did, rather, was to grant legitimacy to initiatives worked out in the commissions; but this process must not be portrayed in positive terms. This granting of legitimacy was in fact a robbing of the legitimacy of all the decisions made in the multiple spaces throughout the plaza not incorporated into an official commission. (anonymous 2012: 24-25)

As the above examples clearly indicate, even among ‘horizontalists’ there is no consensus on the appropriate manner to organize and mobilize collectively. The mere presence of experienced radical or anarchist activists in Occupy Montreal would thus not have been enough to account for the particular form of horizontalism that emerged during the occupation of Victoria Square.

The Diffusion Hypothesis

The diffusion hypothesis sheds light on a distinct and yet potentially complementary dimension. According to Givan, Roberts, and Soule (2010: 10-12) as well as Tarrow (2011: 192), there are three forms of diffusion: direct (relational, that is through social ties and networks, multiple membership in organizations, etc.), indirect (nonrelational, that is through “attribution of similarity” via global communications and the Internet), and mediated (brokered, that is via a third party).

While direct diffusion was clearly at play in the case of OWS, as Spanish activists traveled to New York City in the summer of 2011 and met with local activists (see chapter 9 in this volume), it does not really fit Occupy Montreal. Before 15 October 2011, when the Montreal occupation began, there were no direct contacts between the Indignados or OWS on the one hand, and Occupy Montreal on the other. And even after 15 October 2011, direct contacts between Occupy Montreal and occupations in other cities were minimal. Mediated diffusion does not really apply either, as no particular actor played the role of broker between Occupy Montreal and other occupations. The form of diffusion that is most relevant to accounting for the practices and organizational form of Occupy Montreal is

22 For example, Leach (2013) compares three different models of “collectivist democracy”, including OWS.
indirect diffusion. All the Occupy Montreal activists that I interviewed mentioned that they were following on the Internet what was happening in Egypt, Spain, Greece, and New York City, and were waiting and hoping for something similar to take place in Montreal. This is where the idea of occupying Victoria Square came from.

However, beyond the idea of occupying a public square, the extent to which the practices and organizational form of horizontalism were also diffused through indirect channels is not clear. Although decisions were made in assemblies from the very beginning – there were five meetings before the occupation, after which the GA became the central decision-making body – activists started to look more closely at how the New York GA was organized and functioned after the beginning of the occupation, during the first and second weeks.23 Furthermore, even though some participants had studied the experience of the Spanish and Greek Indignados, the Montreal GA rejected a proposition to build on a practical guide that the Spanish Indignados had produced on grounds that they should not implement a universal template but rather come up with a design suited to local needs and circumstances.24

Therefore, it seems that indirect diffusion may have potentially shaped the practices and organizational form of Occupy Montreal by contributing not as much to the transnational transfer of a model as to the actualization of latent ‘endogenous potentialities for mobilization,’ as Oikonomakis and Roos put it in chapter 9 of this volume. In this respect, the continuity and diffusion hypotheses are compatible. However, how this process of actualization took place is not clear, for, as I have pointed out above, pre-existing activist networks did not really play a role in Occupy Montreal. Claims about the effect of a crisis of representation suffer from the same problem. On the one hand, it seems plausible that this crisis may have contributed to structural conditions fostering indignation and horizontalism, as Oikonomakis and Roos argue. Although the last wave of the World Value Survey

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23 Interview with Occupier 1 on 7 December 2011 and with Occupier 11 on 22 December 2011, both from the facilitation committee. In order to preserve the anonymity of activists and to avoid personalizing roles and positions, I do not mention any names. I only refer to the occupier’s role in the camp and give them numbers (occupier 1, occupier 2, etc.). I also try as much as possible to omit details that could allow readers to identify them.

24 The guide was entitled ‘How to cook a peaceful revolution’ and was produced by Spanish rEvolution. It is available online and in several languages on the website of ‘Take the Square’: http://takethesquare.net/2011/07/15/how-to-cook-a-peaceful-revolution/. There is also a how-to practical website centralizing different guides that were produced during occupations in several cities: http://howtocamp.takethesquare.net/.
(2010-2014) did not include Canada, data from prior waves (1999-2004 and 2005-2009) suggests that the level of distrust toward political parties and the parliament is relatively comparable in Canada, Spain, and the United States. On the other hand, though, low levels of trust could very well fuel a rise in authoritarian, far-right militancy. There is nothing self-evident in the preference for egalitarian, non-hierarchical organizational forms and inclusive and deliberative decision-making processes.

Hence the need to problematize horizontalism. Instead of attempting to falsify the continuity and diffusion hypotheses, I propose to posit continuity and diffusion as the cultural context in which Occupy activists defined their preferences as they faced concrete and practical challenges and engaged in problem-solving strategies and internal struggles. This perspective implies stressing the constructed and dynamic character of horizontalism and treating it as the uncertain outcome of a political process.

Horizontalism as the Uncertain Outcome of a Political Process

The influence of the local repertoire and of the mobilizations taking place abroad seems apparent in the fact that the would-be occupiers made decisions through horizontal deliberation from the very beginning. However, the specific way in which the decision-making should be structured was neither clear nor static. It was constantly being redefined as occupiers interacted with one another and with their environment and as events unfolded. This dynamic was essentially characterized by a very high level of improvisation and reflected the division of labor among activists. In many respects, it fit Szolucha’s depiction of horizontalism in several Occupy camps: “Democracy – as practised in many aspects of Occupy – was not an ideal form of society. It was a real democracy characterised by a degree of messiness and uncertainty that is connected to the realities of all political action” (2013: 22).

Improvization and Trial-and-Error

The occupiers were following neither a plan nor a strategy. Instead, they were trying to implement abstract principles and models and figuring out

25 Although Canada was not as affected by the financial crisis as Spain and the United States, it is reasonable to believe that the level of confidence towards parties and the parliament did not increase in the last few years. If anything, it is more likely to have decreased because of the multiplication of corruption scandals since 2012.
on a daily basis what the construction and sustainability of a democratic and egalitarian camp required. As a member of the media committee explains:

We lacked resources to prepare the occupation. I must say, though, that we prepared everything in a couple of weeks and we were even wondering whether we would be able to spend the first night there, whether the police was going to let us camp. [...] the organizational and decisional structures as well as the logistics were not ready to welcome so many people on the first days.²⁶

Similarly, a member of the facilitation²⁷ committee remarks:

We were full of good intentions but we didn’t really know where we were going. [...] It was a complete improvisation, yes I think improvisation was the leitmotiv of the whole story. Improvisation because, concretely, we were refusing [...] pre-established structures. [...] It allowed us to experiment but at the same time it cut us off from the experience of many people.²⁸

Improvisation applied to all dimensions, not just the set-up and logistics of the camp. The particular way in which to run assemblies and the decision-making process were gradually defined and redefined through trial and error. Participants began with the Morin Code, a very formal model used to make decisions and manage assemblies in Quebec trade and student unions.²⁹ Since very few participants had prior activist experience, the Morin Code was probably the only common frame of reference, as it is generally used to run student assemblies. It was part of the local repertoire of action. Nonetheless, they quickly abandoned it and began experimenting. According to a member of the facilitation committee:

We didn’t have any clear functioning. At the 2nd assembly [before the beginning of the occupation], we tried the Morin Code [...] but we realized that it didn’t work. [...] It was too procedural and didn’t fit the needs of this assembly. [...] At the 3rd assembly [before the beginning of the

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²⁶ Interview with Occupier 3 on 16 December 2011 (conducted in French; my translation).
²⁷ Here, “facilitation” refers to a series of techniques and responsibilities to facilitate the inclusion and equality of participants in a given assembly.
²⁸ Interview with Occupier 1 on 7 December 2011 (conducted in French; my translation).
²⁹ The Code Morin involves formal motions, amendment procedures, etc., and decisions are made with a majority vote.
occupation], a team was given the mandate of working on the structure of the assembly; they came up with a formula in which there were no votes and the goal was consensus. People were expected to make propositions; if you didn’t agree with proposition A, the facilitation team had to make a proposition B and then we would assess the assembly’s feelings, whether it was leaning toward A or B; if it leaned toward neither, the proposition had to be reformulated. […] It was complex and didn’t really work because everybody wanted to talk and we were overwhelmed. […] During the 2nd week of the occupation, some people started to focus 200 percent on the best way to manage the assembly and turned to the signs and symbols used in New York.30

It was eventually decided that a quorum of 75 people was necessary to make binding decisions in the name of the GA. However, it turned out to be problematic because the GA would begin at 6 pm and last several hours, which increasingly meant that by 10 or 11 pm the quorum would not be met. The facilitation team also introduced a ‘progressive’ stack and a ‘step-up/step-back’ principle that gave priority to minorities and people who had not talked yet. If consensus was not reached through deliberation, a vote was taken but decisions still required a 90 per cent majority.

Varieties of Tasks and Perspectives

Many participants disagreed over the best way to structure the GA and run the occupation. Nonetheless, as the occupation began, the conflict was not as ideologically driven as some depictions might suggest. In his account of OWS, Graeber (2013: 23-33) emphasizes the conflict between the ‘verticals’ (the ‘Stalinists’ of the Workers World Party) and the ‘horizontals’ (anarchists and sympathizers of the Industrial Workers of the World and the Zapatistas), with the Trotskyists of the International Socialist Organization in the middle. Insofar as experienced activists and militant organizations were marginal in Occupy Montreal, the conflict was not as ideological.

30 Interview with Occupier 1 on 7 December 2011 (conducted in French; my translation). It is worth pointing out, however, that the ‘human mic’ or ‘people’s microphone,’ which requires the audience to repeat in concentric circles what the speaker is saying, started to be used on the very first day of the occupation even though the Montreal police had not forbidden megaphones like in New York. This reveals an ‘attribution of similarity,’ one of the mechanisms underlying the process of indirect diffusion mentioned above. However, it can also reflect the existing repertoire of action, for according to Graeber (2013: 50-51), this practice was already familiar to many California activists by the time of the Seattle anti-WTO protests in 1999.
The varieties of preferences relative to the GA and the management of the occupation primarily reflected what tasks people were involved in. These tasks led them to focus on particular issues and problems that had to be addressed and, as a result, induced them to hold some preferences rather than others.

In order to outline a variety of perspectives and preferences, here I focus on a set of ‘leading tasks,’ that is, tasks such as articulating a vision, making tactical and strategic decisions, managing internal or external relations, etc., generally associated with leadership in social movements (cf. Earl 2007). Thinking in terms of ‘leading tasks’ allows us to discuss the critical role of particular individuals even when they do not identify themselves, or are not identified by others, as leaders (ibid: 1328). This is all the more relevant when studying a mobilization that claims to be horizontal and leaderless like Occupy. Three sets of leading tasks stand out: assembly facilitation (intra-politics), communication/media (extra-politics), and camp maintenance (infrastructure).31 Each set of tasks entailed different perspectives and preferences because of the particular issues and problems with which it was confronted.

In contrast to the maintenance and communication tasks, facilitation was required even before the occupation began. Moreover, insofar as there was a very high level of uncertainty as to the occupation’s capacity to last more than a day, the main focus of attention was a rally that would include a GA as it had been seen in New York City and other places. People involved in facilitation tasks were the most forceful advocates of the GA, and the individuals who joined them tended to (initially) idealize assemblies. According to a participant who joined the facilitation committee during the first weekend of the occupation:

The myth of the General Assembly is... epic I think and integral to the icons of the Occupy movement. [...] assemblies of people are just iconic and inspiring. So I think there was a lot of anticipation and probably pressure on what that General Assembly was going to be because it was both a tribute to what that day had become a global movement and to recognize what had come before.32

31 Although I lack systematic data on the gendered division of labor during the occupation, bits and fragments of information collected in interviews suggest that facilitation was primarily female, communication/media was primarily male, and maintenance was mixed.
32 Interview with Occupier 11 on 22 December 2011 (in English).
Another participant who joined the facilitation committee explains:

I remember seeing this group of people working out the actual procedure for a facilitation and then watching the General Assembly, and I’m like ‘This is so important!’ [...] I was really in love with the General Assembly. For me, it was the most important thing of the movement. It was what validated the movement, it was the central authority, and I put all my time into it.33

In contrast, the communication and maintenance tasks had other priorities. People involved in communication tasks were mainly concerned with setting up digital communication platforms. Although they may have valued horizontalism and had a say in discussions about the appropriate decision-making process prior to the occupation, as soon as the latter began they focused on practical issues related to their tasks and did not have much time left, if any, to attend the GA.34 One of the main persons involved in maintenance tasks is even more categorical. Although he had prior experience in the global justice movement – he claims that participating in the 2001 protests against the Summit of the Americas, in Quebec City, was a formative experience – and had participated in different urban mobilizations, the tasks in which he was involved meant he had no time left for anything else.35 According to him, on the first day of the occupation,

nobody was actually doing anything. I mean, there was no work or anything going on and I’m thinking, you know, it’s noon, we’re planning on staying the night. There’s tents set up and little else. And these two girls arrived with a tarp which they laid down and they put two baguettes on it. They said: ‘Okay guys, all food donations can go here.’ And I went up to these two girls and said: ‘Hey, can I help?’ And they’re like: ‘Yeah, we need to get a kitchen set up.’ And so the first thing I did was to suggest moving it from there to where it eventually ended up. And basically me and these two girls and gradually a few other people joined, we went to work and worked like non-stop for the next 24 hours building that kitchen.36

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33 Interview with Occupier 8 on 9 February 2012 (in English).
34 Interview with Occupier 3, from the media committee, on 16 December 2011.
35 However, horizontalism also includes the initiatives and efforts of small affinity groups active during the occupation. In this respect, if maintenance tasks were conducted on the basis of egalitarian and inclusive principles, they can be said to contribute to the overall horizontalism of the occupation.
36 Interview with Occupier 6 on 20 January 2012 (in English).
As a result, he did not attend the GA for the first few weeks. But instead of seeing this as problematic, he despised what he considered to be an obvious lack of pragmatism:

I never went to a GA or any kind of political discussion until, like, my third week there. We were so busy. [...] For the first few weeks I was there, myself and the other people, we just rubbished the general assemblies. It was [...] a waste of time. I mean, they had assemblies every single day that would go on for hours and hours and hours, wasting all of these man-hours while stuff needed to get done. And, taking all these people that we could have been using for useful things that had to get done. Like, I understand we’re trying to create an alternative form of democracy here, but at the same time, there’s garbage that has to be picked up, you know?!37

As this participant makes very clear, his focus on maintenance tasks led him to consider a particular set of issues and ignore others. It is in doing so that he articulated his preferences. The preferences that participants held before joining the occupation were gradually redefined as they got involved in specific tasks.

**Shifting Preferences**

The definition of preferences was a dynamic process rather than something that was determined once and for all. As the occupation unfolded, participants kept revising their preferences but in a way that was directly related to their tasks and particular involvement in the occupation. Over the weeks, while formally the GA was still the main locus of deliberation and decision-making, the occupation started to be increasingly segmented into several parallel circuits. One of the main lines of divide was between people actually sleeping in the camp, including several people involved in communication tasks, and others involved in maintenance and facilitation tasks just coming in during the day.38 The experience of these two segments became incommensurable, as the former criticized the latter for making, in the GA, binding decisions that affected the camp without actually being

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37 Interview with Occupier 6 on 20 January 2012 (in English).
38 Participants spending the night at the camp enjoyed a higher status, a sort of symbolic capital, as they were seen as being more invested in the struggle and willing to sacrifice their comfort for the cause.
aware of what was happening in the camp. What made things worse was the fact that many people who attended the GA – and thus participated in the decisions – were not involved in any tasks. This had the effect of undermining the legitimacy of the GA.39

Thus, a central participant in the media committee who spent many nights on the site of the occupation argues that the GA and the camp should have been two distinct entities:

The GA confused the assembly of the movement with the assembly of the camp. Anyone could attend the GA and participate in decisions about the management of the camp while they were not aware of what was happening, they lacked the right information to make appropriate decisions. As a result, people in the camp had to implement decisions that were made by the GA but that did not make any sense. After a while, people in the camp considered that the GA was more or less legitimate because it imposed decisions on them.40

This perspective is reminiscent of the point that Graeber makes about the necessity, from an anarchist standpoint, of making decisions in a radically decentralized manner and on the smallest possible scale. But participants involved in communication tasks were not anarchists. They came to hold this understanding as a result of their experience of the occupation. Nobody had anticipated this problem. It became apparent only after several weeks of occupation. It raises challenging questions about the boundaries of a public occupation and about the category of people who can legitimately be included in decisions. One of the core principles of horizontalism and direct democracy is that of inclusiveness: not only should there not be any form of discrimination, but any one affected by a decision should be able to participate in it. The problem here was that the GA included in the decisions many people not directly affected by them while others who were affected did not always attend the GA.

39 For example, during the last week of the occupation, there were several debates in the GA about whether or not occupiers should leave the square by themselves or wait to be forcefully evicted by the police. It was troubling that most people participating in these discussions and making decisions did not themselves spend the night at the camp and were thus not directly affected by the decision. The GA decided against leaving the square but then very few people showed up on Friday, 25 November 2011, when the police evicted the last campers.
40 Interview with Occupier 3 on 16 December 2011 (conducted in French; my translation). More or less three weeks into the occupation, the media committee imploded and henceforth two committees co-existed, one called excom and the 99%Quebec. Occupier 3 was in 99%Quebec.
This gap between the camp and the GA led a group of participants involved in communication tasks to bypass the GA, call for a press conference on Monday 21 November 2011, and announce that they were leaving the camp. According to Occupier 3, who played a central role in this process, the press communiqué “had not necessarily been prepared in a democratic way, through the GA, but at the same time the GA, as it [stood], [was] not efficient. It [was] not solid enough and we [could not] grant it any legitimacy.” Insofar as it took place while the City of Montreal was pressuring occupiers to end the occupation and not even a week after the eviction of OWS in New York City, this ‘non-approved’ press conference triggered intense debates within Occupy Montreal and reinforced the impression that the occupation was coming to an end.

But participants involved in communication tasks were not the only ones who came to express doubts and criticisms about the functioning of the GA. Even some participants in facilitation tasks, some of whom were the most enthusiastic at the beginning of the occupation, ended up gradually revising their preferences. They were exhausted and found the entire process both very taxing and frustrating. During the first week, they would meet daily at 1 pm for four to five hours, then facilitate the GA at 6 pm for another four or five hours, and, finally, hold a debriefing meeting. Throughout, they would be interrupted by people who wanted to complain about facilitation and the GA. They were constantly being attacked. As a member of the facilitation committee explains: “Facilitators always got a lot of flak for their work. They were underappreciated. People would think that they’re letting their friends’ propositions pass, which was sometimes the case, but most of the time it was not. They’re just following the procedure, and a lot of people didn’t like that.” Although they did not necessarily reject the GA and horizontalism, some participants involved in facilitation tasks did come out of the occupation less enthusiastic. As one facilitator puts it: “At some point, I could no longer stand assemblies, it was just too much. [...] We’re talking about an assembly of 100 people, 150 at most. [...] And we live in a world of 7 billion people. [...] That’s why I increasingly think that this system is not viable.”

However, the shift in preferences was not unidirectional, and some participants did come out of the occupation with a more positive understanding

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41 Interview with Occupier 3 on 16 December 2011 (conducted in French; my translation).
42 Interview with Occupier 11, from the facilitation committee, on 22 December 2011.
43 Interview with Occupier 8 on 9 February 2012 (in English).
44 Interview with Occupier 1 on 7 December 2011 (conducted in French; my translation).
of direct democracy and horizontalism than they had at the beginning. This shift was the result of experience rather than theoretical discussions. This dynamic is well illustrated by an anecdote that a person involved in maintenance tasks told me. It is worth quoting at length:

I was very sceptical when they told me you needed a 90 percent vote to pass something, I was like 'There's no way that's going to work!' I sort of tolerate democracy in general, you know, like, direct democracy, I'm very sceptical about that idea. But now, I figured out how to make them work [...]. The example of the wooden habitations is the perfect example [...] So we came [to the GA] that night [and said]: ‘We got to take down the wooden habitations.’ ‘Boo, no!’ A majority were against that idea. We spent the next 24 hours listening to people, having a lot of meetings, talking, listening, incorporating different ideas, and 24 hours after that failed vote, we brought back essentially the exact same thing, and it passed unanimously. And I figured out the trick to making this thing work is that you have to make people feel that their concerns are being heard, and that they are truly participating in the final decision. And, once you achieve that, then people will vote against their own interests for the benefit of the community. [...] As long as they’re feeling like they’re in that, you know? And that’s when I started to realize this direct democracy thing maybe might work after all.45

With the eviction on 25 November 2011, the occupation came to an end and participants in Occupy Montreal looked for a new place to assemble. After a couple of meetings in different small venues in December 2011, the GA started to meet at the Darling Foundry, a visual arts center located a few blocks away from Victoria Square, in January 2012. But the experience was short-lived, as the beginning of the student strike in February and then what would be called the ‘Maple Spring’ sucked in all the activists of Montreal.

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In this chapter, I have argued that we should not assume that direct democracy and horizontalism are obvious practices and organizational forms that activists adopt simply because they are imitating another mobilization, whether in Madrid or New York City, or because there is a crisis of representation. Similarly, the mere fact that other mobilizations

45 Interview with Occupier 6 on 20 January 2012 (in English).
engaged in relatively similar practices in the past does not explain much by itself unless we are able to show that particular pre-existing networks and organizations allow for the reproduction and transmission of a given know-how. Repertoires do not float freely; they need to be anchored in social carriers and interactions to generate effects.

We need thus to problematize the practices and organizational forms of mobilizations, be they horizontal or not. I contend that in the case of Occupy Montreal, although the practices and organizational form were indirectly shaped by the existing repertoire of action and by diffusion, they stemmed primarily from an open-ended political process in which activists involved in specific tasks were improvising as they attempted to solve practical problems. This process was political insofar as it implied a struggle and it was open-ended insofar as it could have led to other practices and forms. As I have shown in the last section of this chapter, the activists’ preferences were dynamic and kept evolving as interactions and events unfolded.

Finally, one may wonder whether it is really important to pay attention to the particular organizational form and practices of mobilizations. Perhaps it is enough to highlight that activists were critical of hierarchy and were trying to make decisions in egalitarian ways. However, if we stay at such a level of generality and abstraction, we are not saying much. It would be like saying that citizens vote without looking at electoral systems and electoral behavior. Furthermore, in the case of movements engaged in prefigurative politics like Occupy, the process is the demand, the means are the end, and vice versa. It follows that we need to have a precise understanding of the specific process and means used by activists in order to understand their demands and ends and thus what the movement is about.

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