The Occupation Cookbook

or the Model of the Occupation

of the Faculty of Humanities and

Social Sciences in Zagreb

The Occupation Cookbook is a "manual" that describes the organization of the student occupation of the **Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences** that took place in the spring of 2009 and lasted for 35 days. It was written for two reasons: to record what happened, and to present the particular organization of this action in such a way that it may be of use to other activists and members of various collectives if they decide to undertake a similar action.

What does it mean to "occupy" a school? A school occupation is not, as the corporate media like to portray it, a hostile takeover. A school occupation is an action by those who are already its inhabitants – students, faculty, and staff – and those for whom the school exists. (Which is to say for a public institution, the public itself.) The actions termed "occupations" of a public institution, then, are really re-occupations, a renovation and reopening to the public of a space long captured and stolen by the private interests of wealth and privilege. The goal of this renovation and reopening is to inhabit school spaces as fully as possible, to make them truly habitable – to make the school a place fit for living.

— **Marc Bousquet,** from the **Introduction**

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06. THE BEGINNING WAS SUCCESSFUL, WHAT NEXT?

A large number of people showed up at the public discussion, meeting or some other kind of assembly. Obviously, there is interest in the issues. What are the next organizational steps?

It is necessary to organize a meeting with all interested participants in order to discuss the strategy and further actions. The organizers must not fail to take advantage of the initial enthusiasm and increase the number of participants. However, the starting point should be a discussion on the goal of the action and the method of achieving it. Until there is agreement on these issues, it is not possible to move on to the next, practical organizational phase. It has already been briefly described what the goal should be like. What about the method? The method is the occupation and legitimization through direct democracy. From our experience, people are at first opposed because of ignorance or fear or because they have certain wrong, preconceived ideas which they had acquired through the media or through institutional education. But it is astonishing how quickly the people will rise to support the fight for basic human rights and direct democratic manner of decision-making if these are explained with clear arguments and positive experiences from real life. By adopting the direct democratic model of decision-making the organizational matrix of the action is set. In that situation it also becomes clear what it means exactly "decisions made by the plenum are binding for all."

After the participants have accepted the direct democratic model and the goal, supported by all members of the collective, has been formulated, it can be said that two basic components for the organization of a plenum are present. This, of course, implies that all previously described actions were done in a relative secrecy that will be ended at the moment of the occupation and subsequent takeover of the institution (working, educational or some other). In order for the plenum to be fully functional, it has to be completely public. In other words, everyone who might want to participate (and has a right to, in accordance with the model of participation set by the particular plenum) needs to know where and when the plenum is held.

What is left to be described is the third basic component of organizing a plenum, which becomes important after the first two have been formed, i.e. at the moment when there are clear indications of the future plenum. The issue in question is the issue of the relationship with the media and the closely related issue of leadership.

07. THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP & RELATIONS WITH THE MEDIA

Clearly, a non-hierarchical, direct democratic model of decision-making completely eliminates the need for leaders, 'expert' negotiators and representatives. It is extremely important that the movement decides on

the question of leadership at the very beginning. In the plenary model of organization the decisions are made collectively; there are no representatives, which means that there can neither be prominent individuals who would aspire to be the voice of the movement. It is of utmost importance to suppress the 'leadership tendencies" from the very beginning. This should be done at the beginning because it is often hard to erase the first impression that is made as it leaves an imprint that is hard to get rid of – both internally, within the movement itself, and in the public perception. Leaders and the dangers they bring are easier to prevent than to annul once they have gained some weight in public perception and have become potentially outside of the control of the plenum.

The first real tests appear when it comes to dealing with the media. It is usually presumed that occupations and takeovers require professional spokespersons, i.e. one or more persons that will communicate with journalists. But this practice must be abandoned if one does not want the action to be personalized or the function of the plenum overshadowed by privileged spokespersons. The most efficient way to avoid these dangers is to preserve the anonymity of all members of the collective. The anonymity is a great defense against the formation of leaders – if the individuals who present the views of the collective in public are anonymous and never the same, there is no possibility of an individual standing out amongst the many and becoming a representative of the whole movement. Needless to say, this method of continuous rotation of members in public also leaves an impression of the strength of the movement.

A common opinion is that media attention can be gained only by playing by the rules set by the media, which mostly means submitting to the logics of the supply and demand of spectacles of personal stories and indiscreetness. Even purely politically motivated actions need to be translated into personal narratives and schematic 'human motivation' stories, supposedly in order to guarantee a better reception in the public. In this way the action's political aspect itself is sacrificed at the moment of its public articulation. An emancipatory movement must be progressive in all aspects of its actions, which includes the media relations as well. What the media want from the movement is unimportant; what is important is the message the movement is trying to convey. It has been shown that the most efficient way to coerce the media to convey the message as intended is by completely avoiding the personalized spectacle and by insistently controlling the articulation of the action's goals by means of written press releases.

It is necessary to reject the mistaken belief that a movement cannot succeed unless it has leaders and employs a conventional approach to the media. Just the opposite, it can be argued that amongst the major strengths of our movement were our specific media strategy and a complete lack of leaders.

Different spokespersons every day, carefully prepared press releases and the

fact that we insisted on the importance of the collective averted two serious dangers: the impositions of leaders and media instrumentalization.

08. PLENUM: 1, 2, 3

What did the plenary sessions themselves look like? The first issue that needed to be addressed was the question of the facilitator, i.e. the person that would in a way mediate and coordinate the happenings at a plenary session. It was decided that two facilitators would be needed to facilitate the functioning of the plenum since the sessions were expected to involve many participants. The role of the facilitator was reduced to that of minimal technical contribution – the facilitator's tasks are to help during the preparation of the daily agenda and to observe the order in which participants at the session are allowed to speak. That means that the facilitator does not have the powers usually given to persons in that position. He is not above the plenum; his task is simply to implement a minimal set of rules devised by the plenum.

The rules and guidelines of the FHSS plenum (which define how the plenum and plenary sessions function) are a reflection of practical problems we have encountered. We would like to emphasize that these are not rules that must be valid for all circumstances and situations. They are essential procedural rules agreed upon and followed by the plenum, but can be changed by the plenum at any time if necessary. Naturally, this does not mean that the plenum functions according to obscure and arbitrary rules. The plenum has to follow democratic principles at all times, which means that any form of compulsion (bar the 'compulsion' to follow the plenum's decisions) is entirely unacceptable.

Over time, we have come up with certain technical solutions that significantly facilitate the functioning of the plenum. One such is the rule that a member may speak only if he or she holds the microphone – in this way, the participants learn not to interrupt the speakers but to wait until they get the microphone themselves. It has been shown that the use of microphone has a positive effect on the flow and manner of discussions at the plenary sessions. Another important innovation is projecting the minutes onto a wall during a plenary session, so that everybody can read them as they are being written. The minute keeping is thus completely transparent, which eliminates the possibility of a mistake or manipulation by the minute-taker.

09. CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES
& THE FUNCTION OF WORKING GROUPS

The plenary model of decision-making is often criticized because it is allegedly illegitimate, orchestrated (claiming that the decisions are made beforehand), and because more skilled orators have a disproportionately higher influence on it. The question of legitimacy is easily countered. The plenum is open to everyone, every session is announced well in advance, everyone has the right to speak and influence the process of decision-making.

For practical reasons, because it was not possible to discuss all topics in great detail at the plenary sessions, the concept of working groups was introduced as a means of dealing with particular issues. The meetings of working groups were always publicly announced in advance and are also open to all interested participants. If a problematic issue arises during a plenary session, the advocates of opposing opinions are always encouraged to form a working group and try to find a platform that would offer a satisfying resolution to the issue in question.

The greatest problem is the third issue, namely the comparative advantage of those more talkative and more skilled orators. We have to honestly say that we have not resolved this problem; the only solution is to constantly appeal to those who speak often to be responsible, not to repeat themselves and not to privatize the plenum. It should also be mentioned that the working groups functioned as a kind of workshops where one could, in a smaller group, practice speaking in public and accepting different opinions, which contributed to the group cohesion. Encouraging unrestricted forming of working groups, which can (but need not) function as the plenum's advisory organs, has proved an excellent supplement to the plenary sessions.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The basic criteria for organizing a plenum:

a) Setting the goal

b) Direct democratic method of decision-making

c) Media relations strategy

d) Suppressing leadership and authoritarianism

The combination of these four criteria should result in:

a) Many people joining in

b) the formation of a strong plenum

c) opening a public discussion about the problem that the action is focused on

d) a step forward towards realizing the set goal

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