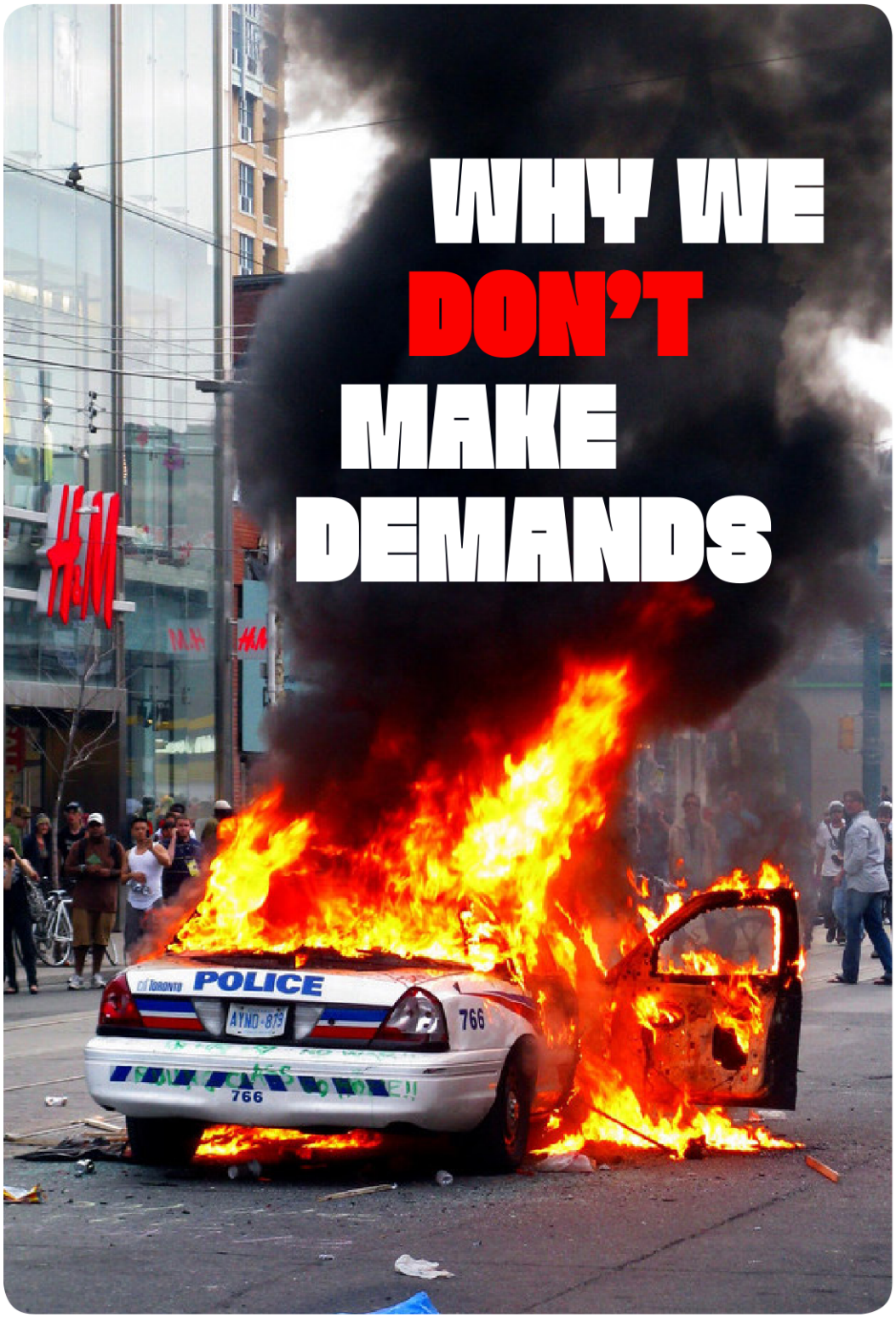
Perhaps, however, the moral of the story (and the hope of the world) lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself.

–James Baldwin
No Name in the Street

CrimethInc.



From Occupy to Ferguson, whenever a new grassroots movement arises, pundits charge that it lacks clear demands. Why won't protesters summarize their goals as a coherent program? Why aren't there representatives who can negotiate with the authorities to advance a concrete agenda through institutional channels? Why can't these movements express themselves in familiar language, with proper etiquette?

Often, this is simply disingenuous rhetoric from those who prefer for movements to limit themselves to well-behaved appeals. When we pursue an agenda they'd rather not acknowledge, they charge that we are irrational or incoherent. Compare the People's Climate March of 2014, which united 400,000 people behind a simple message while doing so little to protest that it was unnecessary for the authorities to make even a single arrest,[1] with the Baltimore uprising of April 2015. Many praised the Climate March while deriding the rioting in Baltimore as irrational, unconscionable, and ineffective; yet the Climate March had little concrete impact, while the Baltimore riots compelled the chief prosecutor to bring almost unprecedented charges against police officers. You can bet if 400,000 people responded to climate change the way a couple thousand responded to the murder of Freddie Gray, the politicians would change their priorities.

Even those who demand demands out of the best intentions usually misunderstand demandlessness as an omission rather than a strategic choice. Yet today's demandless movements are not an expression of political immaturity—they are a pragmatic response to the impasse that characterizes the entire political system.

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1 When was the last time 400,000 people were anywhere in New York without the police arresting anyone? That was protest not just as pressure valve, but as active pacification—as a way of diminishing the friction between protesters and the order they oppose.

If it were so easy for the authorities to grant protesters' demands, you'd think we'd see more of it. In fact, from Obama to Syriza, not even the most idealistic politicians have been able to follow through on the promises of reform that got them elected. The fact that charges were pressed against Freddie Gray's killers after the riots in Baltimore suggests that the only way to make any headway is to break off petitioning entirely.

So the problem is not that today's movements lack demands; the problem is the politics of demands itself. If we seek structural change, we need to set our agenda outside the discourse of those who hold power, outside the framework of what their institutions can do. We need to stop *presenting demands* and start *setting objectives*. Here's why.

MAKING DEMANDS PUTS YOU IN A WEAKER BARGAINING POSITION.

Even if your intention is simply to negotiate, you put yourself in a weaker bargaining position by spelling out from the beginning the least it would take to appease you. No shrewd negotiator begins by making concessions. It's smarter to appear implacable: *So you want to come to terms? Make us an offer. In the meantime, we'll be here blocking the freeway and setting things on fire.*

There is no more powerful bargaining chip than being able to implement the changes we desire ourselves, bypassing the official institutions—the true meaning of direct action. Whenever we are able to do this, the authorities scramble to offer us everything we had previously requested in vain. For example, the Roe vs. Wade decision that made abortion legal occurred only after groups like the Jane Collective set up self-organized networks that provided affordable abortions to tens of thousands of women.

Of course, those who can implement the changes they desire directly don't need to make demands of anyone—and the sooner they recognize this, the better. Remember how people in Bosnia burned down government buildings in February 2014, then convened plenums to formulate identify where it makes sense to cooperate, and where it doesn't—a kind of clarity that does not result from lining up behind a lowest-common-denominator demand.

From this vantage point, we can see that choosing not to make demands is not necessarily a sign of political immaturity. On the contrary, it can be a savvy refusal to fall into the traps that disabled the previous generation. Let's learn our own strength, outside the cages and queues of representational politics—beyond the politics of demands.

who are impatient for real change will be all the more likely to run into the arms of nationalists and fascists, as the only ones openly seeking to challenge the status quo. We need to be explicit about what we want and how we intend to go about getting it. Not in order to force our methodology on everyone, as authoritarian organizers do, but to offer an opportunity and example to everyone else who is looking for a way forward. Not to present a demand, but because this is the opposite of a demand: we want self-determination, something no one can give us.

IF NOT DEMANDS, THEN WHAT?

The way we analyze, the way we organize, the way we fight—these should speak for themselves. They should serve as an invitation to join us in a different way of doing politics, based in direct action rather than petitioning. The people in Ferguson and Baltimore who responded to the murders of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray by physically confronting the police did more to force the issue of police violence than decades of pleading for community oversight. Seizing spaces and redistributing resources, we sidestep the senselessly circuitous machinery of representation. If we must send a message to the authorities, let it be this single, simple demand: *Don't mess with us*.

Instead of making demands, let's start setting objectives. The difference is that we set objectives on our own terms, at our own pace, as opportunities arise. They need not be framed within the logic of the ruling powers, and their realization does not depend upon the goodwill of the authorities. The essence of reformism is that even when you win something, you don't retain control over it. We should be developing the power to act on our own terms, independent of the institutions we are taking on. This is a long-term project, and an urgent one.

In pursuing and achieving objectives, we develop the capacity to seek more and more ambitious goals. This stands in stark contrast to the way reformist movements tend to collapse when their demands are realized or shown to be unrealistic. Our movements will be stronger if they can accommodate a variety of objectives, so long as those do not openly conflict. When we understand each other's objectives, it is possible to

demands to present to the government. A year later, they'd received nothing for their pains but criminal charges, and the government was once again as stable and corrupt as ever.

LIMITING A MOVEMENT TO SPECIFIC DEMANDS STIFLES DIVERSITY, SETTING IT UP FOR FAILURE.

The conventional wisdom is that movements need demands to cohere around: without demands, they will be diffuse, ephemeral, ineffectual.

But people who have different demands, or no demands at all, can still build collective power together. If we understand movements as spaces of dialogue, coordination, and action, it is easy to imagine how

a single movement might advance a variety of agendas. The more horizontally structured it is, the more capable it should be of accommodating diverse goals.

The truth is that practically all movements are wracked by internal conflicts over how to structure themselves and how to prioritize their goals. The *demand for demands* usually arises as a power play by the factions within a movement that are most invested in the prevailing institutions, as a means of delegitimizing those who want to build up power autonomously rather than simply petitioning the authorities. This misrepresents real political differences as mere disorganization, and real opposition to the structures of governance as political naïveté.

Forcing a diverse movement to reduce its agenda to a few specific demands inevitably consolidates power in the hands of a minority. For who decides which demands to prioritize? Usually, it is the same sort of people who hold disproportionate power elsewhere in our society: wealthy, predominantly white professionals well versed in the workings of institutional power and the corporate media. The marginalized are marginalized again within their own movements, in the name of efficacy.

Reforms that achieve short-term gains often set the stage for long-term problems.

Yet this rarely serves to make a movement more effective. A movement with space for difference can grow; a movement premised on unanimity contracts. A movement that includes a variety of agendas is flexible, unpredictable; it is difficult to buy it off, difficult to trick the participants into relinquishing their autonomy in return for a few concessions. A movement that prizes reductive uniformity is bound to alienate one demographic after another as it subordinates their needs and concerns.

A movement that incorporates a variety of perspectives and critiques can develop more comprehensive and multifaceted strategies than a single-issue campaign. Forcing everyone to line up behind one set of demands is bad strategy: even when it works, it doesn't work.

more territory opens up. Others may not immediately join you on the fringes, but knowing that some people are willing to assert that agenda may embolden them to act more ambitiously themselves.

In purely pragmatic terms, those who embrace a diversity of tactics are stronger, even when it comes to achieving small victories, than those who try to limit themselves and others and to exclude those who refuse to be limited. On the other hand, from the perspective of long-term strategy, the most important thing is not whether we achieve any particular immediate result, but how each engagement positions us for the next round. If we endlessly defer the questions we really want to ask, the right moment will never arrive. We don't just need to win concessions; we need to develop capabilities.

DOING WITHOUT DEMANDS DOESN'T MEAN CEDING THE SPACE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE.

Perhaps the most persuasive argument in favor of making concrete demands is that if we don't make them, others will—hijacking the momentum of our organizing to advance their own agendas. What if, because we fail to present demands, people end up consolidating around a liberal reformist platform—or, as in many parts of Europe today, a right-wing nationalist agenda?

Certainly, this illustrates the danger of failing to express our visions of transformation to those with whom we share the streets. It is a mistake to escalate our tactics without communicating about our goals, as if all confrontation necessarily tended in the direction of liberation. In Ukraine, where the same tensions and momentum that had given rise to the Arab Spring and Occupy produced a nationalist revolution and civil war, we see how even fascists can appropriate our organizational and tactical models for their own purposes.

But this is hardly an argument to address demands to the authorities. On the contrary, if we always conceal our radical desires within a common reformist front for fear of alienating the general public, those

Why did their campaign against the fare hike succeed? At the time, Brazil was one of the few nations worldwide with an ascendant economy; it had benefitted from the global economic crisis by drawing investment dollars away from the volatile North American market. Elsewhere—in Greece, Spain, and even the United States—governments had their backs to the wall no less than anti-austerity protesters, and could not have granted their demands even if they wished to. It was not for want of specific demands that no other movement was able to achieve such concessions.

Scarcely a year and a half later, when the streets had emptied out and the police had reasserted their power, the Brazilian government introduced another series of fare hikes—bigger ones this time. The MPL had to start all over again. It turns out you can't overthrow capitalism one reform at a time.

IF YOU WANT TO WIN CONCESSIONS, AIM BEYOND THE TARGET.

Even if all you want is to bring about a few minor adjustments in the status quo, it is still a wiser strategy to set out to achieve structural change. Often, to accomplish small concrete objectives, we have to set our sights much higher. Those who refuse to compromise present the authorities with an undesirable alternative to treating with reformists. Someone is always going to be willing to take the position of negotiator—but the more people refuse, the stronger the negotiator's bargaining position will be. The classic reference point here is the relation between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X: if not for the threat implied by Malcolm X, the authorities would not have had such an incentive to parley with Dr. King.

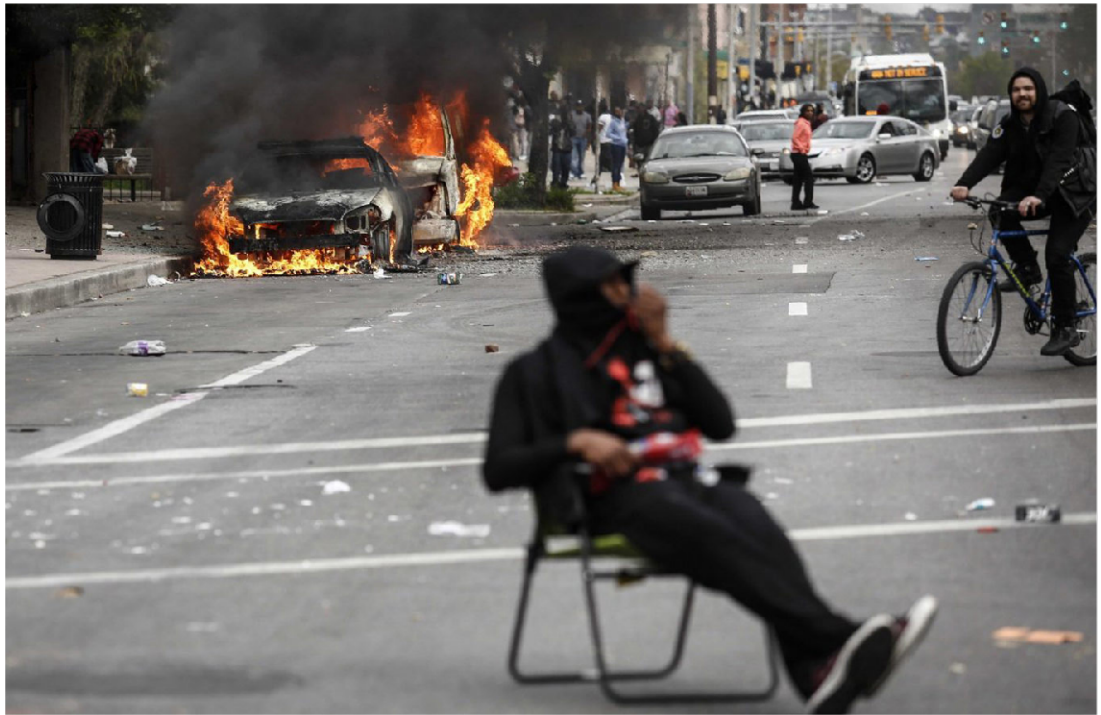
For those of us who want a truly radical change, there is nothing to be gained by watering down our desires for public consumption. The Overton window—the range of possibilities considered politically viable—is not determined by those at the purported center of the political spectrum, but by the outliers. The broader the distribution of options, the

LIMITING A MOVEMENT TO SPECIFIC DEMANDS UNDERMINES ITS LONGEVITY.

Nowadays, as history moves faster and faster, demands are often rendered obsolete before a campaign can even get off the ground. In response to the murder of Michael Brown, reformists demanded that police wear body cameras—but before this campaign could get fully underway, a grand jury announced that the officer who murdered Eric Garner would not be tried, either, even though Garner's murder had been caught on camera.

No corporate initiative is going to halt climate change; no government agency is going to stop spying on the populace; no police force is going to abolish white privilege.

Movements premised on specific demands will collapse as soon as those demands are outpaced by events, while the problems that they set out to address persist. Even from a reformist perspective,



it makes more sense to build movements around the issues they address, rather than any particular solution.

LIMITING A MOVEMENT TO SPECIFIC DEMANDS CAN GIVE THE FALSE IMPRESSION THAT THERE ARE EASY SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS THAT ARE ACTUALLY EXTREMELY COMPLEX.

"OK, you have a lot of complaints—who doesn't? But tell us, what solution do you propose?"

The demand for concrete particulars is understandable. There's no use in simply letting off steam; the point is to change the world. But meaningful change will take a lot more than whatever minor adjustments the authorities might readily grant. When we speak as though there are simple solutions for the problems we face, hurrying to present ourselves as no less "practical" than government policy experts, we set the stage for failure whether our demands are granted or not. This will give rise to disappointment and apathy long before we have developed the collective capacity to get to the root of things.

The same court system that ruled for desegregation imprisons a million black people today; the same National Guard that oversaw integration in the South is mobilized to repress demonstrators in Ferguson and Baltimore.

Especially for those of us who believe that the fundamental problem is the unequal distribution of power and agency in our society, rather than the need for this or that policy adjustment, it is a mistake to promise easy remedies in a vain attempt to legitimize ourselves. It's not our job to present ready-made solutions that the masses can applaud from the sidelines; leave that to demagogues. Our challenge, rather, is to create spaces where people can discuss and implement solutions

change does not take place. Granting small demands can serve to divide a powerful movement, persuading the less committed participants to go home or turn a blind eye to the repression of those who will not compromise. Such small victories are only granted because the authorities consider them the best way to avoid bigger changes.

In times of upheaval, when everything is up for grabs, one way to defuse a burgeoning revolt is to grant its demands before it has time to escalate. Sometimes this looks like a real victory—as in Slovenia in 2013, when two months of protest toppled the presiding government. This put an end to the unrest before it could address the systemic problems that gave rise to it, which ran much deeper than which politicians were in office. Another government came to power while the demonstrators were still dazed at their own success—and business as usual resumed.

During the buildup to the 2011 revolution in Egypt, Mubarak repeatedly offered what the demonstrators had been demanding a couple days earlier; but as the situation on the streets intensified, the participants became more and more implacable. Had Mubarak offered more, sooner, he might still be in power today. Indeed, the Egyptian revolution ultimately failed not because it asked for too much, but because it didn't go far enough: in unseating the dictator but leaving the infrastructure of the army and the "deep state" in place, revolutionaries left the door open for new despots to consolidate power. For the revolution to succeed, they would have had to demolish the architecture of the state itself while everyone was still in the streets and the window of possibility remained open. "The people demand the fall of the regime" offered a convenient platform for much of Egypt to rally around, but did not prepare them to take on the regimes that followed.

In Brazil in 2013, the MPL (Movimento Passe Livre) helped catalyze massive protests against an increase in the cost of public transportation; this is one of the only recent examples of a movement that succeeded in getting its demands met. Millions of people took to the streets, and the twenty-cent fare hike was canceled. Brazilian activists wrote and lectured about the importance of setting concrete and achievable demands, in order to build up momentum by incremental victories. Next, they hoped to force the government to make transportation free.

whose uncompromising actions won the movement its leverage in the first place suddenly find career activists who joined afterwards telling them what to do—or denying that they are part of the movement at all. This drama played out in Ferguson in August 2014, where the locals who got the movement off the ground by standing up to the police were slandered by politicians and public figures as outsiders taking advantage of the movement to engage in criminal activity. The exact opposite was true: outsiders were seeking to hijack a movement initiated by honorable illegal activity, in order to re-legitimize the institutions of authority.

In the long run, this sort of pacification can only contribute to a movement's demise. That explains the ambiguous relation most leaders have with the movements they represent: to be of use to the authorities, they have to be capable of subduing their comrades, but their services would not be required at all if the movement did not pose some kind of threat. Hence the strange admixture of militant rhetoric and practical obstruction that often characterizes such figures: they must ride the storm, yet hold it at bay.

SOMETIMES THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN TO A MOVEMENT IS FOR ITS DEMANDS TO BE MET.

Reform serves to stabilize and preserve the status quo, killing the momentum of social movements, ensuring that more thoroughgoing

directly, on an ongoing and collective basis. Rather than proposing quick fixes, we should be spreading new practices. We don't need blueprints, but points of departure.

MAKING DEMANDS PRESUMES THAT YOU WANT THINGS THAT YOUR ADVERSARY CAN GRANT.

On the contrary, it's doubtful whether the prevailing institutions could grant most of the things we want even if our rulers had hearts of gold. No corporate initiative is going to halt climate change; no government agency is going to stop spying on the populace; no police force is going to abolish white privilege. Only NGO organizers still cling to the illusion that these things are possible—probably because their jobs depend on it.

Even when such institutions can be compelled to fulfill specific demands, this only legitimizes tools that are more often used against us.

A strong enough movement could strike blows against industrial pollution, state surveillance, and institutionalized white supremacy, but only if it didn't limit itself to mere petitioning. Demand-based politics limits the entire scope of change to reforms that can be made within the logic of the existing order, sidelining us and deferring real change forever beyond the horizon.

There's no use in asking the authorities for things they can't grant and wouldn't grant if they could. Nor should we give them an excuse to acquire even more power than they already have, on the pretext that they need it to be able to fulfill our demands.

MAKING DEMANDS OF THE AUTHORITIES LEGITIMIZES THEIR POWER, CENTRALIZING AGENCY IN THEIR HANDS.

It is a time-honored tradition for nonprofit organizations and leftist coalitions to present demands that they know will never be granted: don't invade Iraq, stop defunding education, bail out people not banks, make the police stop killing black people. In return for brief audiences with bureaucrats who answer to much shrewder players, they water down their politics and try to get their less complaisant colleagues to behave themselves. This is what they call pragmatism.

Such efforts may not achieve their express purpose, but they do accomplish something: they frame a narrative in which the existing institutions are the only conceivable protagonists of change. This, in turn, paves the way for additional fruitless campaigns, additional electoral spectacles in which new candidates for office hoodwink young idealists, additional years of paralysis in which the average person can only imagine accessing her own power through the mediation of some political party or organization. Rewind the tape and play it again.

Real self-determination is not something that any authority can grant us. We have to develop it by acting on our own strength, centering ourselves in the narrative as the protagonists of history.

MAKING DEMANDS TOO EARLY CAN LIMIT THE SCOPE OF A MOVEMENT IN ADVANCE, SHUTTING DOWN THE FIELD OF POSSIBILITY.

At the beginning of a movement, when the participants have not yet had a chance to get a sense of their collective power, they may not be able to recognize how thoroughgoing the changes they want really are. To frame demands at this point in the trajectory of a movement can stunt it, limiting the ambitions and imagination of the participants. Likewise, setting a precedent at the beginning for narrowing or watering down its goals only increases the likelihood that this will happen again and again.

Imagine if the Occupy movement had agreed on concrete demands at the very beginning—would it still have served as an open space in which so many people could meet, develop their analysis, and become radicalized? Or would it have ended up as a single protest encampment concerned only with corporate personhood, budget cuts, and perhaps the Federal Reserve? It is better for the objectives of a movement to develop as the movement itself develops, in proportion to its capacity.

MAKING DEMANDS ESTABLISHES SOME PEOPLE AS REPRESENTATIVES OF THE MOVEMENT, ESTABLISHING AN INTERNAL HIERARCHY AND GIVING THEM AN INCENTIVE TO CONTROL THE OTHER PARTICIPANTS.

In practice, unifying a movement behind specific demands usually means designating spokespeople to negotiate on its behalf. Even if these are chosen "democratically," on the basis of their commitment and experience, they can't help but develop different interests from the other participants as a consequence of playing this role.

In order to maintain credibility in their role as negotiators, spokespeople must be able to pacify or isolate anyone that is not willing to go along with the bargains they strike. This gives aspiring leaders an incentive to demonstrate that they can reign in in the movement, in hopes of earning a seat at the negotiating table. The same courageous souls