



# TIDAL

**OCCUPY  
THEORY  
OCCUPY  
STRATEGY**

# Learning from Detroit

## “What time is it on the clock of the world?”

—James and Grace Lee Boggs,  
*Revolution and Evolution in the  
Twentieth Century* (1974)

**I**n speaking of Detroit, we are cautious. The name itself is burdened with journalistic clichés and romantic fantasies about the picturesque wasteland, the decayed rust-belt, and the tragedy of the American Dream. These images tend to erase those living and struggling in the city. To speak of Detroit is necessarily to enter a contested landscape in both geographical and ideological terms. We feel compelled to engage nonetheless.

In both its devastation and possibility, we encounter Detroit as an outpost from our collective future. Our friends describe their home as “The Chiapas of the North.” And like the Zapatistas, their long-term struggles throw everything, everywhere, into a new light: our own cities, our own work, our own lives. In Detroit, local struggles for racial, economic, and environmental justice are understood in a global context of empire, neoliberalism, and climate disaster. This is all communicated in a fundamental question we heard time and again in Detroit: *How do we live?* This is the basis of what our friends call “visionary organizing.”

### Why Detroit?

Long before the latest convulsion of Wall Street brought forth the cry “We are the 99%,” communities of color in East Detroit were already living the permanent disaster of capitalism. It has been a crisis-center of the global economy for decades. Detroit echoes in mythic proportions the devastation dealt by capital to poor people from Buffalo

to the Bronx to Baltimore and beyond. The entire landscape of East Detroit is a Wall Street crime scene. Each empty lot or abandoned home retains the traces of displaced families and communities.

As capital and the state have receded from entire swaths of what used to be the city, the survivors have remade the scorched earth into a radical laboratory for experiments in non-capitalist living: urban farms, non-monetary economies, cooperatives, educational and arts initiatives. These projects are not simple acts of protest. They are self-organized survival struggles grounded in principles of care, healing, and community.

### Rupture and Other Rhythms of Struggle

We captured the imagination of the world when we occupied Wall Street for two months. At the symbolic epicenter of the corporate assault on all life, we supported and cared for one another through mutual aid and direct action. For a brief period, we became experts of our own lives. Then governmental agencies employed brutality, surveillance, and other tactics to suppress our freedoms. As we were forcefully evicted from our occupied parks and squares, we understood that democracy was as elusive in New York as it was Cairo or Tunis.

Following the eviction, we began to sharpen our analysis of debt and to understand its central role in the structural adjustments that subjugate nations, cities, and individuals alike. Then, Hurricane Sandy struck our city, and we stepped into the void left by the state. Once again, we were reminded that our struggle against the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few is also a struggle for life—and that an obsession with growth and firing up a sputtering economy misses the larger ecological questions confronting the planet at large.

Sandy challenged us with a different scale and

temporality. The rupture sent us to Detroit with questions. There we met generations of militant and visionary organizers who have worked below the radar to reimagine and reconstruct their neighborhoods along non-capitalist lines, brick by brick, block by block. We have much to learn from Detroit, starting with our relationship to time. *What would it mean to combine a politics of rupture with other rhythms of struggle?* Revolutionary patience will be essential.

### **The Centrality of Land**

East Detroit has ceased to be a city in any recognizable sense. It is beyond the divide between urban and rural. In the void of capital, it has become possible for residents to liberate and cultivate the land for communal reproduction. When the people care for the land, the land cares for the people. This is not about agrarian simplicity. We share with our friends in Detroit an understanding that land is central to building movements, practicing freedom, and sustaining life. As we found in our own small way at Wall Street, liberated territories are necessary for nurturing, educating, and feeding the freedom fighters of the future.

Liberating land is not simply an act of physical reclamation. In Detroit, it has required a dense combination of tools, skills, knowledge, wisdom, commitment, and relationships developed over generations. The commons have not just been there for the taking. They have been produced through struggle.

And struggles are playing out as we speak. Vast landscapes of empty lots, foreclosed homes, and moldering factories in Detroit are now in the crosshairs of state agencies and developers. This new enclosure movement is unfolding against the backdrop of collective debt bondage. The entire city is on the cusp of being mortgaged to an “emergency management plan” by the state of Michigan on account of the debts its owes to Wall Street.

Municipal bonds are being weaponized to raze the last remnants of public infrastructure. Let it burn, clear the slate, expropriate. That’s how the 1% rolls.

Detroit, which is 85% black, is about to be taken over by 80% white Michigan on the pretext of outstanding debts. But that begs the question: Who owes what to whom? To hide the racial and class biases motivating the abandonment of entire communities, expropriation can even take on a green veneer: vast expanses of the former city will return to nature, it is said, becoming an ecological amenity for new waves of “creative” pioneers in search of a frontier experience of their own. Urban farming risks becoming a buzzword of entrepreneurial greenwashing — think Hantz Farms — the precise opposite of community-based agriculture and environmental justice.

### **Moving Together**

We stand with the liberators of the land. But to do so in a meaningful way will require an intensive learning process that we have only just embarked upon. What, if anything, we may have to offer remains to be seen. Conversations are happening, knowledge is being shared, bonds are being forged.

As we organize, we are mindful of what we heard in Detroit: Who is the we in the room? Who are we accountable to? Who is not in the room? Who should be in the room? And are we organizing at the grassroots level, involving those who should be involved?

We have been striking the death machine at Wall Street. Seeds of non-capitalist healing and freedom are being sewn in Detroit. There is a synergy of analysis and a solidarity of spirit. Our geographies are already conjoined. Back and forth, hosting and visiting, we could be on the threshold of an historic alliance based in a common affirmation of land, life, and liberation.



### **“Grow a Garden, Grow a Community”**

Greenhouse at  
Freedom Freedom,  
East Detroit.

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freedomfreedom.  
wordpress.com