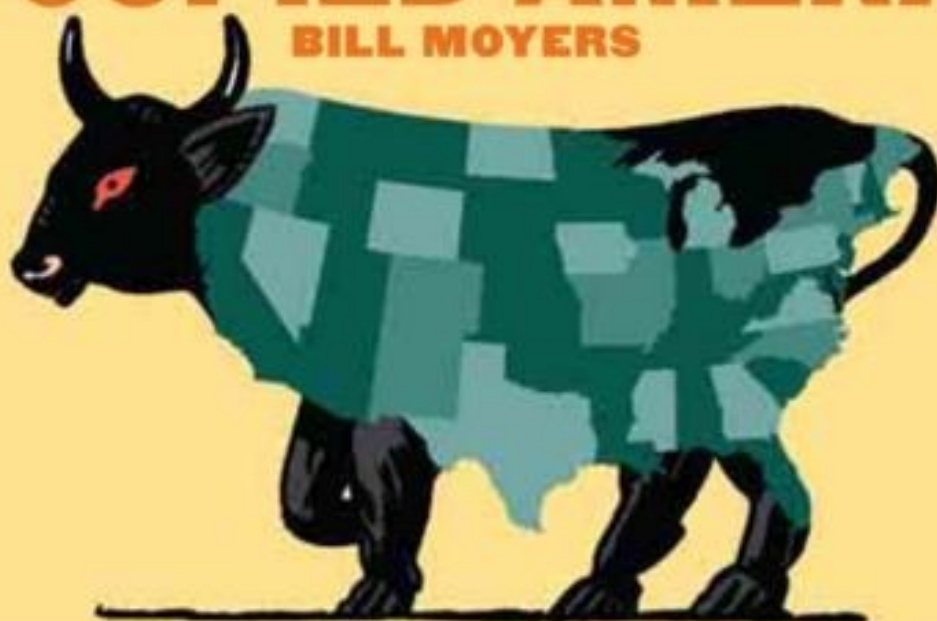


# THE Nation.

## HOW WALL STREET OCCUPIED AMERICA

BILL MOYERS



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**Letters** **Marine, You Funny Little Sunny Little...**

WEST CHESTER, PA. If Marine Le Pen does not win the presidency of France, I wish she could run in the US [Agnès Catherine Poirier, "Can Marine Le Pen Win in France?" Oct. 24]. She is everything I'm...

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**Letters** **Keep On Trillin**

CYBERSPACE I dearly love Calvin Trillin's lines. Poetically he well defines What it means to understand Political chicanery and underhand. I never miss his sterling verse. He says



## Anita Hill: The Truth Hurt

# Letters

CINCINNATI

Re Patricia J. Williams’s “Twenty Years Later... We Still Believe Anita Hill” [Oct. 24]: we believe Anita Hill because she was telling the truth. The debacle surrounding her personal trials, along with the gross abuse of power shown by those sitting on the bench, are the legacy of the right wing of the current Court, eroding respect not only for their Court but for all courts—and, sadly, for the rule of law in this country.

E.A. TAVERNER

MARINA DEL REY, CALIF.

It has always seemed strange to me that in all the enraged talk about how the Senate Judiciary Committee savaged Anita Hill, nobody ever mentions who chaired that committee and allowed that to happen. It was none other than our esteemed vice president, Joe Biden. He is, in fact, the one most responsible for Hill’s shabby treatment and for Thomas’s confirmation. The Democrats had a majority in the Senate and could have blocked that appointment. Biden not only allowed that travesty; he voted for Thomas’s confirmation. So you can stop complaining that the Republicans gave us Clarence Thomas.

SANFORD THIER

PHILADELPHIA

In 1991, as a young twentysomething, I landed a job in investment banking and was grateful for the break. I soon found myself in the surreal situation of being chased around the desk, literally, by my boss, while Anita Hill’s testimony played in the background. I complained to no one and deflected his advances. I dreaded travel for work because of the inevitable grope. I invented social plans so I could find my own ride after meetings. I thought it horribly unfair that because of his behavior, I could be marked as a troublemaker, or worse: “Did she or didn’t she?” Meanwhile my boss derided Hill; if it was true, he said, why did she wait until now to speak up?

If the subject of Anita Hill’s credibility ever comes up, I tell my story. I can imagine if my tormentor had remained an influence in my career how the stakes would have kept getting higher. I too would have kept quiet. However, if he were someday to verge on such a position of influence as Supreme Court justice, I knew I would be compelled to speak out—no matter how many years had passed. I am grateful to Anita Hill; I have defended her story with my own. Unfortunately, like so many pioneers, she took a bullet. As a young lawyer, she may have dreamed of one day sitting on the Supreme Court herself, not of being the subject of my “Anita Hill moment.”

**Next Article**

## When America Didn't Need to 'Occupy'

# Letters

BELLINGHAM, WASH.

My family lost their Kansas farm during the Great Depression. As tenant farmers, my parents lived with indebtedness until 1943, finally recovering from depression, dust, storms, grasshopper plagues and severe drought. Does the present government have any understanding of the anguish people go through when they lose their homes, their farms, their livelihoods? It does not seem so.

In the early '30s we had a president who gave us hope. In our little town of 600, federal assistance made it possible to construct an entire municipal sewer system to replace hundreds of unsanitary outdoor privies, while hiring dozens over an extended period. This resulted in jobs for carpenters and plumbers too. Some dozen women, including my widowed aunt (with four children), were employed in the "sewing room" making overalls and shirts for those who could not afford to buy them. My aunt was also the recipient of "commodities"—rice, grapefruit, canned meat, peanut butter, cornmeal and prunes. An older brother, a cousin and many other young men enrolled in the CCC and constructed a county lake, still in recreational use today. Another brother and cousin, both in high school, were paid to help elementary teachers grade papers. My father and other tenant farmers were hired to repair a bridge.

Although we were very poor, we had the feeling that our government cared and was doing something about poverty and unemployment. In 2011 that feeling is gone.

DON PILCHER

# HOW WALL STREET OCCUPIED AMERICA

*Why the rich keep getting richer and our democracy is getting poorer.*

by BILL MOYERS



During the prairie revolt that swept the Great Plains in 1890, populist orator Mary Elizabeth Lease exclaimed, “Wall Street owns the country.... Money rules.... Our laws are the output of a system which clothes rascals in robes and honesty in rags. The [political] parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us.”

She should see us now. John Boehner calls on the bankers, holds out his cup and offers them total obeisance from the House majority if only they fill it. Barack Obama criticizes bankers as “fat cats,” then invites them to dine at a pricey New York restaurant where the tasting menu runs to \$195 a person.

That’s now the norm, and they get away with it. The president has raised more money from employees of banks, hedge funds and private equity managers than any Republican candidate, including Mitt Romney. Inch by inch he has conceded ground to them while espousing populist rhetoric that his very actions betray.

Let’s name this for what it is: hypocrisy made worse, the further perversion of democracy. Our politicians are little more than money launderers in the trafficking of power and policy—fewer than six degrees of separation from the spirit and tactics of Tony Soprano.

Why New York’s Zuccotti Park is filled with people is no mystery. Reporters keep scratching their heads and asking, “Why are you here?” But it’s clear they are occupying Wall Street because Wall Street has occupied the country. And that’s why in public places across the nation workaday Americans are standing up in solidarity. Did you see the sign a woman was carrying at a fraternal march in Iowa the other day? It read, I Can’t Afford to Buy a Politician So I Bought This Sign. Americans have learned the hard way that when rich organizations and wealthy individuals shower Washington with millions in campaign contributions, they get what they want.

In his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, historian Gordon Wood says that our nation discovered its greatness “by creating a prosperous free society belonging to obscure people with their workaday concerns and pecuniary pursuits of happiness.” This democracy, he said, changed the lives of “hitherto neglected and despised masses of common laboring people.”

Those words moved me when I read them. They moved me because Henry and Ruby Moyers were “common laboring people.” My father dropped out of the fourth grade and never returned to school because his family needed him to pick cotton to help make ends meet. Mother managed to finish the eighth grade before she followed him into the fields. They were tenant farmers when the Great Depression knocked them down and almost out. The year I was born my father was making \$2 a day working on the highway to Oklahoma City. He never took home more than \$100 a week in his working life, and he made that only when he joined the union in the last job he held. I was one of the poorest white kids in town, but in many respects I was the equal of my friend who was the daughter of the richest man in town. I went to good public schools, had the use of a good public library, played sandlot baseball in a good public park and traveled far on good public roads with good public facilities to a good public university. Because these public goods were there for us, I never thought of myself as poor. When I began to piece the story together years later, I came to realize that people like the Moyerses had been included in the American deal. “We, the People” included us.

It’s heartbreaking to see what has become of that bargain. Nowadays it’s every man for himself. How did this happen? The rise of the money power in our time goes back forty years. We can pinpoint the date. On August 23, 1971, a corporate lawyer named Lewis Powell—a board member of the death-dealing tobacco giant Philip Morris and a future justice of the Supreme Court—released a confidential memorandum for his friends at the US Chamber of Commerce. We look back on it now as a call to arms for class war waged from the top down.

Recall the context of Powell’s memo. Big business was being forced to clean up its act. Even Republicans had signed on. In 1970 President Nixon put his signature on the National Environmental Policy Act and named a White House Council to promote environmental quality. A few months later millions of Americans turned out for Earth Day. Nixon then agreed to create the Environmental Protection Agency. Congress acted swiftly to pass tough amendments to the Clean Air Act, and the EPA announced the first air pollution standards. There were new regulations directed at lead paint and pesticides. Corporations were no longer getting away with murder.

Powell was shocked by what he called an “attack on the American free enterprise system.” Not just from a few “extremists of the left” but also from “perfectly respectable elements of society,” including the media, politicians and leading intellectuals. Fight back and fight back hard, he urged his compatriots. Build a movement. Set speakers loose across the country. Take on prominent institutions of public opinion—especially the universities, the media and the courts. Keep television programs “monitored the same way textbooks should be kept under constant surveillance.” And above all, recognize that political power must be “assiduously [sic] cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination” and “without embarrassment.”

Powell imagined the Chamber of Commerce as a council of war. Since business executives had “little stomach for hard-nosed contest with their critics” and “little skill in effective intellectual and philosophical debate,” they should create think tanks, legal foundations and front groups of every stripe. These groups could, he said, be aligned into a united front through “careful long-range planning and implementation...consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and united organizations.”

The public wouldn’t learn of the memo until after Nixon appointed Powell to the Supreme Court that



same year, 1971. By then his document had circulated widely in corporate suites. Within two years the board of the Chamber of Commerce had formed a task force of forty business executives—from US Steel, GE, GM, Phillips Petroleum, 3M, Amway, and ABC and CBS (two media companies, we should note). Their assignment was to coordinate the crusade, put Powell's recommendations into effect and push the corporate agenda. Powell had set in motion a revolt of the rich. As historian Kim Phillips-Fein subsequently wrote, "Many who read the memo cited it afterward as inspiration for their political choices."

They chose swiftly. The National Association of Manufacturers announced that it was moving its main offices to Washington. In 1971 only 175 firms had registered lobbyists in the capital; by 1982 nearly 2,500 did. Corporate PACs increased from fewer than 300 in 1976 to more than 1,200 by the mid-'80s. From Powell's impetus came the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Manhattan Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy (precursor to what we now know as Americans for Prosperity) and other organizations united in pushing back against political equality and shared prosperity. They triggered an economic transformation that would in time touch every aspect of our lives.

The Chamber of Commerce, in response to the memo, doubled its membership, tripled its budget and stepped up its lobbying efforts. It's going stronger than ever. Most recently, it called in its agents in Congress to kill a bill to provide healthcare to 9/11 first responders for illnesses linked to their duty on that day. The bill would have paid for their medical care by ending a special tax loophole exploited by foreign corporations with business interests in America. The Chamber, along with nearly 1,300 business and trade groups, urged Congress to pass the new tax bill, signed into law just before this past Christmas and filled with all kinds of stocking stuffers, including about fifty tax breaks for businesses. The bill gave some of our biggest banks, financial companies and insurance firms another year's exemption to shield their foreign profits from being taxed here in the United States; among the beneficiaries were giants Citigroup, Bank of America, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, all of which survived the financial debacle of their own making because taxpayers bailed them out in 2008.

The coalition got another powerful jolt of adrenaline in the late '70s from the wealthy right-winger who had served as Nixon's treasury secretary, William Simon. His book *A Time for Truth* argued that "funds generated by business" must "rush by multimillions" into conservative causes to uproot the institutions and the "heretical strategy" of the New Deal. He called on "men of action in the capitalist world" to mount "a veritable crusade" against progressive America. *BusinessWeek* (October 12, 1977) somberly explained that "it will be a bitter pill for many Americans to swallow the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more."

Those "men of action in the capitalist world" were not content with their wealth just to buy more homes, more cars, more planes, more vacations and more gizmos than anyone else. They were determined to buy more democracy than anyone else. And they succeeded beyond their expectations. After their forty-year "veritable crusade" against our institutions, laws and regulations—against the ideas, norms and beliefs that helped to create America's iconic middle class—the Gilded Age is back with a vengeance.

If you want to see the story pulled together in one compelling narrative, read *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*, by political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson. They wanted to know how America had turned into

a society starkly divided into winners and losers. They found the culprit: the revolt triggered by Lewi Powell, fired up by William Simon and fueled by rich corporations and wealthy individuals. “Step by step,” they write, “and debate by debate America’s public officials have rewritten the rules of American politics and the American economy in ways that have benefited the few at the expense of the many.”

There you have it. They bought off the gatekeeper, got inside and gamed the system. As the rich and powerful got richer and more powerful, they owned and operated the government, “saddling Americans with greater debt, tearing new holes in the safety net, and imposing broad financial risks on Americans as workers, investors, and taxpayers.” Now, write Hacker and Pierson, the United States is looking more and more like “the capitalist oligarchies, like Brazil, Mexico, and Russia,” where most of the wealth is concentrated at the top while the bottom grows larger and larger with everyone in between just barely getting by.

The revolt of the plutocrats was ratified by the Supreme Court in its notorious Citizens United decision last year. Rarely have so few imposed such damage on so many. When five pro-corporate conservative justices gave “artificial legal entities” the same rights of “free speech” as humans, they told our corporate sovereigns that the sky’s the limit when it comes to their pouring money into political campaigns.

The ink was hardly dry on the Citizens United decision when the Chamber of Commerce organized a covertly funded front and rained cash into the 2010 campaigns. According to the Sunlight Foundation corporate front groups spent \$126 million in the fall of 2010 while hiding the identities of the donors. Another corporate cover group—the American Action Network—spent more than \$26 million of undisclosed corporate money in just six Senate races and twenty-six House elections. And Karl Rove groups, American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS, seized on Citizens United to raise and spend at least \$38 million, which NBC News said came from “a small circle of extremely wealthy Wall Street hedge fund and private equity moguls”—all determined to water down financial reforms that might prevent another collapse of the financial system. Jim Hightower has said it well: today’s proponents of corporate plutocracy “have simply elevated money itself above votes, establishing cold, hard cash as the real coin of political power.”

No wonder so many Americans have felt that sense of political impotence that historian Lawrence Goodwyn described as “the mass resignation” of people who believe in the “dogma of democracy” on a superficial public level but whose hearts no longer burn with the conviction that they are part of the deal. Against such odds, discouragement comes easily. But if the generations before us had given up, slaves would still be waiting on their masters, women would still be turned away from the voting booths on election day and workers would still be committing a crime if they organized.

So take heart from the past, and don’t ever count the people out. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution created extraordinary wealth at the top and excruciating misery at the bottom. Embattled citizens rose up. Into their hearts, wrote the progressive Kansas journalist William Allen White, “had come a sense that their civilization needed recasting, that their government had fallen into the hands of self-seekers, that a new relation should be established between the haves and have-nots.” Not content to wring their hands and cry “Woe is us,” everyday citizens researched the issues, organized to educate their neighbors, held rallies, made speeches, petitioned and canvassed, marched and marched again. They plowed the fields and planted the seeds—

sometimes on bloody ground—that twentieth-century leaders used to restore “the general welfare” as a pillar of American democracy. They laid down the now-endangered markers of a civilized society: legally ordained minimum wages, child labor laws, workers’ safety and compensation laws, pure foods and safe drugs, Social Security, Medicare and rules that promote competitive markets over monopolies and cartels.

The lesson is clear: Democracy doesn’t begin at the top; it begins at the bottom, when flesh-and-blood human beings fight to rekindle what Arlo Guthrie calls “The Patriot’s Dream.”

Living now here but for fortune

Placed by fate’s mysterious schemes

Who’d believe that we’re the ones asked

To try to rekindle the patriot’s dreams

Arise sweet destiny, time runs short

All of your patience has heard their retort

Hear us now for alone we can’t seem

To try to rekindle the patriot’s dreams

Can you hear the words being whispered

All along the American stream

Tyrants freed, the just are imprisoned

Try to rekindle the patriot’s dreams

Ah but perhaps too much is being asked of too few

You and your children with nothing to do

Hear us now for alone we can’t seem

To try to rekindle the patriot’s dreams

Who, in these cynical times, with democracy on the ropes and America’s body politic pounded again and again by the blows of organized money—who would dream such a radical thing? Look around.

Bill Moyers, a broadcast journalist for forty years, returns to public television in January with a weekly program on the state of democracy. His latest book is *Bill Moyers Journal: The Conversation Continues*. This article is adapted from a speech he gave in October at Public Citizen’s fortieth-anniversary gala.

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# The Audacity of Occupy Wall Street

*The protesters have put their faith in the last seemingly credible force in the world: each other.*

by RICHARD KIM



JESSI BAUTISTA

A few years ago, Joe Therrien, a graduate of the NYC Teaching Fellows program, was working as a full-time drama teacher at a public elementary school in New York City. Frustrated by huge class sizes, sparse resources and a disorganized bureaucracy, he set off to the University of Connecticut to get an MFA in his passion—puppetry. Three years and \$35,000 in student loans later, he emerged with a degree in hand, and because puppeteers aren't exactly in high demand, he went looking for work at his old school. The intervening years had been brutal to the city's school budgets—down about 14 percent on average since 2007. A virtual hiring freeze has been in place since 2009 in most subject areas, arts included, and spending on art supplies in elementary schools crashed by 73 percent between 2006 and 2009. So even though Joe's old principal was excited to have him back, she just couldn't afford to hire a new full-time teacher. Instead, he's working at his old school as a full-time "substitute"; he writes his own curriculum, holds regular classes and does everything a normal teacher does. "But sub pay is about 50 percent of a full-time salaried position," he says, "so I'm working for half as much as I did four years ago, before grad school, and I don't have health insurance.... It's the best-paying job I could find."

Like a lot of the young protesters who have flocked to Occupy Wall Street, Joe had thought that hard work and education would bring, if not class mobility, at least a measure of security (indeed, a master's degree can boost a New York City teacher's salary by \$10,000 or more). But the past decade of stagnant wages for the 99 percent and million-dollar bonuses for the 1 percent has awakened the kids of the middle class to a national nightmare: the dream that coaxed their parents to meet the demands of work, school, mortgage payments and tuition bills is shattered. Down is the new up.

But then in these grim times, something unexpected happened: at first scores met in parks around New York City this summer to plan an occupation of Wall Street, then hundreds responded to their call, then thousands from persuasions familiar and astonishing, and now more than 100 cities around the country are Occupied. In the face of unchecked capitalism and a broken, captured state, the citizens c

Occupy America have done something desperate and audacious—they put their faith and hope in the last seemingly credible force left in the world: each other.

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Sometime during the second week of the Occupation, Joe took that leap. Within his first hour at Liberty Park, he was “totally won over by the Occupation’s spirit of cooperation and selflessness.” He has been going back just about every day since. It took him a few days to find the Arts and Culture working group, which has its roots in the first planning meetings and has already produced a museum’s worth of posters (from the crudely handmade to slicker culture-jamming twists on corporate designs), poetry readings, performance-art happenings, political yoga classes and Situationist spectacles like the one in which an artist dressed in a suit and noose tie rolled up to the New York Stock Exchange in a giant clear plastic bubble to mock the speculative economy’s inevitable pop.

Alexandre Carvalho, a Brazilian doctor who worked in Rio’s favelas and was one of the original organizers of Arts and Culture, explains that the group’s praxis revolves around two principles. “First—autonomy, horizontalism and collectivism. We’re nonhierarchical, self-regulating, self-deliberating and self-organizing. Everyone is creating their own stuff, but we’re connected to a larger hub through the Arts and Culture group.” The second principle is something Alexandre calls “virgeo,” a mashup of “virtual” and “geographical.” “We try to have both an on-the-ground conversation and an online conversation so that people all over the world can send their ideas and respond to our work.” The same concepts apply, more or less, to the other culture working groups at OWS—from Media (which shoots video for OWS’s livestream, documents direct actions and produces educational videos) to the Library (which has received more than 3,500 books, all logged in an online card catalog, from the nearly complete works of Noam Chomsky to *Creative Cash: How to Sell Your Crafts, Needlework, Designs and Know-How*).

At one of Arts and Culture’s meetings—held adjacent to 60 Wall Street, at a quieter public-private indoor park that’s also the atrium of Deutsche Bank—it dawned on Joe: “I have to build as many giant puppets as I can to help this thing out—people love puppets!” And so Occupy Wall Street’s Puppet Guild, one of about a dozen guilds under the Arts and Culture working group, was born. In the spirit of OWS, Joe works in loose and rolling collaboration with others who share his passion for puppetry or whose projects somehow momentarily coincide with his mission. With the help of a handful of people he built the twelve-foot Statue of Liberty puppet that had young and old alike flocking to him on October 8 in Washington Square Park. Right now, he’s working with nearly thirty artists to stage Occupy Halloween, when his newest creations, a twelve-foot Wall Street bull and a forty-foot Occupied Brooklyn Bridge inspired by Chinese paper dragons—along with a troupe of dancers playing corporate vampires—will inject a little bit of countercultural messaging into the annual parade of Snookis and True Blood wannabes strutting down Sixth Avenue.

Those of harder head or heart may tweet—giant puppets, #srsly? Yes, it’s hard to draw a straight line from something like Occupy Halloween to the overthrow of global capitalism or a financial transactions tax or student debt relief or any number of goals—some of world-historical magnitude, some straight from the playbook of reformist think tanks—that swirl around Liberty these days. But it’s creative types, either shoved into crisis by the precarious economy or just sick of making things under the corporate system, who have responded most enthusiastically to Occupy Wall Street’s call. It’s not where one might have looked for a revolt to emerge organically. In subsequent Occupations like the one in Oakland, anti-racist organizers have been a dominant force; and in Rust Belt towns

across the Midwest, blue-collar types have led the way. But the first spark, here in New York, was generated when artists, students and academics hooked up with activists from Bloomborgville, a three week occupation near City Hall to protest the mayor's budget cuts. This unlikely mix has proved to be a tactical boon, says Alexandre: "Artists are in a privileged position to take the terrain without too much repression. It's harder for the police to move against you when you are clearly doing something nonviolent and artistic."

When I ask Joe if he thinks Occupy Wall Street should make repealing budget cuts like the ones that struck New York's public schools a priority, he replies that the thought hadn't really crossed his mind. "I hope there are groups of people who are working on that specific issue," he says, but for the moment he's "prioritizing what I'm most passionate about." Which, he explains, is "figuring out how to make theater that's going to help open people up to this new cultural consciousness. It's what I'm driven to do right now, so I'm following that impulse to see where it leads."

Since September 17, the first day of the Occupation, thousands of people have flocked to Liberty to follow this impulse to live life anew. To stay for even a few days there is to be caught up in an incredible delirium of talking, making, doing and more talking—a beehive in which the drones have overthrown the queen but are still buzzing about furiously without any immediately apparent purpose. Someone might shout over the human microphone, "Mic check! (Mic check!) We need! (We need!) Some volunteers! (Some volunteers!) To go to Home Depot! (To go to Home Depot!) And get cleaning supplies! (And get cleaning supplies!)" A handful of people might perk up and answer the call—or not, in which case it is made again and again. Sometimes too many show up and are sent away; sometimes an Occupier jumps to attention but gets distracted by something or someone shiny. Liberty's evolving alleyways, and instead of shopping for the revolution is next seen discussing the politics of micro-finance. Somehow, some way—brooms and mops, bleach and scrub brushes show up. They mysteriously vanish, and an ad hoc committee is organized to replenish them and then to guard them. To this day, Liberty is kept relatively clean, which keeps the cops out; the mums in the planters still bloom, hardy by stock but made hardier by the Occupation's life-sustaining and downwardly distributed ethic of care.

One of the first working groups that the original organizers created was simply called Food, and its first budget aspired to raise just \$1,000 for peanut butter sandwiches. It now takes in donations from around the world and dishes out up to 3,000 meals a day; nobody is turned away as long as there is a morsel left, and there almost always is. Pizzas arrive by bike or car, many sent by labor unions; canned and dry goods are shipped to OWS's UPS address (118A Fulton St. #205, New York, NY 10038); oatmeal, quinoa and rice come in large sacks and small supermarket packages; chicken and beef, apples and seasonal root vegetables are trucked in from organic farms upstate. Trained chefs were quick to volunteer their time and have even opened up their kitchens.

Once the Occupation took root in Liberty, new working groups formed to meet its growing human needs: Sanitation; Comfort (which collects and distributes sleeping bags, tarps and warm clothes); Medics (which is staffed by nurses, doctors, therapists, acupuncturists and EMT workers, and sees up to 100 patients a day); Security (yes, there is some form of "law" at OWS, including guidelines against public urination and defecation); and Sustainability (which composts 100 pounds of food waste each day and handles Liberty's recycling program). Each day, the race to reproduce life itself at Liberty begins, and each day it is largely met, in theory at least, without the use of two things—the money-form and hierarchy.

A mantra that pings around Occupy Wall Street is that the Occupation is creating within the quadrant of Liberty Park the society it wants to see in the outside world. This claim has struck some as naïve: after all, union pizzas don't descend from heaven; they are paid for by dues collected by union leaders. But the idea isn't really to be segregated and self-sustaining. As Yotam Marom, a 25-year-old organizer who is affiliated with a participatory socialist collective called the Organization for a Free Society, puts it, "We're creating alternative models of the world we want to live in while also using those new institutions as a staging ground to fight for that world—that's what's radical and cool about occupations." Academics call this "prefigurative politics," a term that describes acting as if utopian democratic practices exist in the here and now. Its precedents include Gandhi (We must be the change we want to see in the world), European autonomism, the anti-nuke movement and, most recently, the anti-globalization movement, especially its anarchist tendencies.

On the ground at Liberty, prefigurative politics is manifest in the directly democratic process that guides the nightly General Assembly as well as all working groups and caucus meetings. In fact, the principle of horizontalism strongly influences all social relations there. When I dropped in on the library one day it was being staffed by Bill Scott, an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh; Steven Syrek, a graduate student in English at Rutgers; and Briar ("gender pronoun: it!"), an undergrad at NYU who was debating whether to drop out of school instead of racking up more debt. In another context they might have been stacked up vertically (professor, TA, student), but at Liberty they were all just putting stickers on books.

Anyone who shows up can participate on equal terms in the General Assembly and working groups; there is no membership, and proposals must pass by consensus. Anyone can block consensus out of "serious ethical or safety concerns," and if those aren't resolved by amendments or clarifications, a vote is taken for modified consensus, which requires 90 percent support. A number of procedures and group norms—from the "progressive stack," which privileges minority speakers; to the practice of "step up, step back," which calls on participants to be aware of how often they speak; to daily meetings of the Facilitation working group—guard against the breakdown of these processes. They can be slow, frustrating and sometimes ugly—and who has time for all these meetings?—but overall the crowd seems mostly satisfied with what has gone down so far. ("We're at least as effective as the US Senate," one organizer told me.)

More than any other quality of Occupy Wall Street—except perhaps for the ubiquitous drum circle—is these anarchist practices that have elicited the most hand-wringing from establishment leftists. Some, like New School politics professor James Miller, worry that OWS will recapitulate the failure of the New Left. In an op-ed for the New York Times, Miller warned that an obsession with participatory democracy could allow violent militants or ideological extremists to hijack the movement, and he darkly cited the French anti-globalization manifesto *The Coming Insurrection*, a text he calls a "touchstone for the anarchists in Occupy Wall Street," as evidence of the movement's potential to descend into nihilism. *The Coming Insurrection* is, indeed, a worrying text; it predicts the total collapse of modern society, instigated in part by local cells of revolutionaries who exploit moments of crisis (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) in order to replace late capitalism with autonomist units of life. But few Occupiers I met at Liberty had even heard of the book, and the idea that it laid the template for Occupy Wall Street seems largely to come from Glenn Beck, who has been obsessed with it for years and sometimes attributes Obama's actions to its philosophy.

More to the point, from day one the Occupation has been scrupulously nonviolent. Its emphasis on

autonomy and consensus has tempered rather than emboldened the fetishization of militancy. Nobody is coerced into a direct action, and much deliberation is given to how direct actions could affect the most vulnerable in the group—like undocumented immigrants and the Occupiers, those who sleep at Liberty and have developed a surprisingly close relationship with the beat cops who patrol it.

Does callous revolutionary fervor exist in and around Occupy? Sure, there are flashes of it—for example, at a recent debate about Occupy Wall Street at Bluestockings bookstore, Malcolm Harris, an editor at *The New Inquiry* journal, responded to a question about whether anarchist tactics could achieve free higher education by saying that “a free university in a capitalist economy is like a reading room in a prison” (boos and obscene gestures ensued). But most OWS activists I spoke with forcefully rejected the idea that the movement should or would heighten crisis to provoke revolutionary struggle. “I’m not for increasing the immiseration of people around the world who are starving. Who are we to say, Let it get really bad?” asks Yotam.

OWS organizers are, moreover, acutely aware that the movement’s extraordinary potential lies in its ability to bring together a range of participants who coalesce maybe once in a generation: anarchists and Marxists of a thousand different sects, social democrats, community organizers, immigrants’ rights activists, feminists, queers, anti-racist organizers, capitalists who want to save capitalism by restoring the Fordist truce, the simply curious and sympathetic. Republicans like Eric Cantor have denigrated Occupy Wall Street as “a mob,” and the right-wing press has raised the specter of “anarchism” to distinguish OWS from populism. But it is, in fact, the movement’s emphasis on direct democracy, derived from anarchism, that has allowed such an unwieldy set of actors to occupy the same space. Early on, it was the consensus model that enabled a handful of people of color to block language in the movement’s Declaration of the Occupation of New York City that they felt falsely suggested a postracial America. “It was a very scary experience. It was still a majority-white space, and we were four visibly brown people—one wears a turban—standing up to say, No, this can’t happen!” recalls Thanu Yakupitiyage, a 26-year-old immigrants’ rights organizer. But the block held and the language was amended, and instead of bolting from Liberty (This is just a bunch of white folks in the park, she originally thought), Thanu helped establish OWS’s People of Color working group—which, among other goals, tries to make sure that minorities are represented in every other working group and caucus.

Likewise, the movement’s malleable and open nature has created space for a range of supporters and affinity groups, like the Occupied Wall Street Journal, now published in Spanish and online, and OccupyWriters.com, a collective started by Nation writers Jeff Sharlet, Kiera Feldman and Nathan Schneider, which has gathered some 2,000 signatures and published short dispatches and vignettes by Lemony Snicket, Alice Walker, Ursula K. Le Guin and others. True to spirit, anyone who identifies as a writer can sign the OccupyWriters.com petition, and the original organizers are taking a step back from the project to make way for new blood, including from outside New York. These media endeavors may not work per se under the auspices of the New York General Assembly, but they’ve lent their creative energies to the mix—helping to break through the establishment press’s early condescending coverage.

At the moment, the movement’s energy is overwhelmingly directed at keeping this fusion of forces alive, to focus on what unifies—the common belief, for example, that capitalism is out of control and that the political system has broken down—rather than what divides; and to debate without hard preconceptions a range of solutions. As Kobi Skolnick, an Israeli-American activist who comes out of



the peace movement, put it, “Socialism is a great idea. Anarchism is a great idea. Moderating capitalism is a great idea. We can’t afford to have an either/or mentality anymore.” It’s a message that even Occupy Wall Street’s revolutionaries can get down with, for now. As Alexandre Carvalho says, “We are on a path that goes to revolution, but it can pass through reform.”

In this early stage, the movement seems both extremely fragile and extremely potent. The threats of police action, internal rancor, negative public opinion and burnout all loom; like the winter, some of those perils are unavoidable. But so far the Occupiers have pulled off a remarkable feat—to summon all the specters of left history and yet slip past the fatal noose of infighting. Who knows how long this will last? If it does, perhaps the culture of anarchism will be remembered as the left’s exonerator instead of as its hangman’s knot.

On the ground, it hasn’t been the hardliners who have most exulted in the social experiment that is Liberty Park. Living in the conditional tense requires more than just ideological commitment; it takes the curious mixture of patience and innocence found mostly in the young. At the heart of the Occupation are young professionals and creative types—architects, graphic designers, programmers, curators, musicians, writers, managers, actors and Williamsburg hipsters whose talents primarily lie in stitching birds onto things (see Creative Cash). They take part, on and off, in the General Assembly, but they are mostly concerned with creating the dizzying life-world that has distinguished the movement as a cultural as well as political force. Many of these folks are strivers facing downward economic pressure, but a good number of them could be members of Richard Florida’s “creative class,” those whose presence supposedly signals affluence.

Liberty Park is culture-rich, but not in that way. Its denizens include Katie Davison, a 31-year-old filmmaker who used to direct fashion commercials until her family became “collateral damage in the financial crisis”: her father, once an executive at GMAC, died in a car crash the same day he was fired from a subsequent job. At some point, Katie vowed to stop doing commercial work and started a documentary on inequality and the collapse of the American dream. Her friends said she was crazy, and sometimes she felt that way too until she followed a hunch and got on a plane from Los Angeles to New York on September 16, one day before the Occupation began. She’s been shooting video for the Media group ever since, although like many early Occupiers, she soon faced a dilemma: funds depleted, should she take a paying gig or keep working for the Occupation? She chose both. “I don’t understand how I’m going to balance the revolution and editing this vampire movie,” she laments.

For Katie, who comes from an anti-capitalist background, the appeal of OWS is “beyond political”: it is “spiritual and philosophical.” Her day-to-day work life is defined by the principles of horizontalism, autonomy and collectivism. Like a lot of Occupiers, Katie says that the point of working without hierarchies is to “show through direct action that something else is possible.... This empowers people who have no power in the real world, but in this world they do, and this changes human potential and the human value system.” Katie admits that at times “working with people in an all-inclusive manner has been very difficult.” She’s used to hierarchical structures on production sets (“I’m the director—and I direct”). In the beginning, the Media working group was mobbed with volunteers who said they could shoot; but when the videos came in, it became clear that folks were coming from different skill levels. “How do you create something where people don’t feel bad about the things they are making?” she asks. One solution has been to adopt a collective model in which roles are traded day to day; another has been to set up trainings and classes so that “photographers can learn to walk straighter now.” This focus on empowerment has also informed the relations between

groups in different cities—the New York livestream was set up by people from Global Revolution who had been in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol. When the Occupation in Washington, DC, took off, Global Revolution sent a team there, and then to Pittsburgh, and the OWS Media group has also been in touch with Occupations across America to share lessons and pitfalls.

The term “consciousness raising” drops without embarrassment from many mouths, and there is an Education and Empowerment working group whose mission is essentially that ’70s thing. All of this comes with contradictions; for example, the now ritualized focus on leaderlessness tends to obscure the relative power and legitimacy bestowed upon early Occupiers. Conversely, the open-ended, consensus-driven meetings have led to situations where newcomers can block proposals that movement die-hards have worked on for weeks.

How this social experiment relates to OWS politics and goals, its future and its capacity to create enduring change, is very much an open question. Will Briar have as many opportunities as its fellow librarians have had? Will Joe get the health insurance and job stability he needs? Can Occupy Wall Street affect the lives of people outside Liberty’s borders?

Since the last week of September, when Occupy Wall Street hit the front pages after videos of unwarranted police aggression went viral, the question of demands has increasingly weighed on the movement. At first, the issue came from the outside and carried the whiff of appeasement: What do the kids want, and how can they be bought off? Some Occupiers shot back in defiance, “Demands are for terrorists!”

But as the movement has grown—taking in veteran organizers and garnering declarations of solidarity from labor, progressive community groups, left-leaning intellectuals, think tanks and even members of Congress—the question has become more insistent. Some pressure has come from these allies, who have been happy to grab onto Occupy’s unexpected coattails or collaborate on a series of direct actions but who approach politics from a more constituent-based, results-driven model. No doubt, elected officials would also like to see demands made, as everyone from President Obama to New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has comically tried to both sympathize with and distance themselves from the Occupation’s primal expressions of frustration and rage. With approval ratings at 43 percent and climbing (that’s almost five times higher than Congress’s 9 percent), the movement has intruded upon electoral politics, and a list of demands that could be rejected or accommodated would certainly help the pols fill out their dance cards.

But the push for demands has come from the inside too. A Demands working group took shape in early October, largely outside Liberty. A hasty New York Times article almost exclusively quoting its members provoked fierce criticism at that night’s General Assembly, which released a statement saying that “the GA has not reached a consensus regarding any statement of demands...and the demands list submitted to the NYT was never presented to the GA.” Likewise, on October 21, OccupyWallStreet.org posted a disclaimer saying that the Demands group is “not empowered by the NYC General Assembly,” is “not open-source and does not act by consensus” and “only represents themselves.”

But a movement that claims to be open to all isn’t in a great position to exile its dissidents, so since that dustup, the Demands group has been absorbed into the process. It now posts its documents online and uses modified consensus rules, although some question the group’s fidelity to such procedures and consequently also the group’s legitimacy. These issues flared up at the October 30 General Assembly

when the Demands group presented its first proposal, a call for “a massive public works and public service program” that would create “jobs for all.” After a heated and messy deliberation that failed to get past even the first round of questions, the proposal was tabled until the next week, allowing Demands to conduct more meetings and outreach.

That General Assembly exposed a clear ideological schism between anarchists, on the one hand, and Marxists, progressives and liberals, on the other, with the former predisposed to reject any demands (like jobs for all) that appeal to the state instead of directly to the people. But the meeting wasn’t particularly well attended—as many Occupiers at Liberty were milling about reading, singing or kibitzing on other matters as were clustered around the human mic—and away from the fray, in the working groups themselves, the issue seemed much less polarized and much less significant. Most organizers I spoke with were open to demands at some point but preferred to focus on movement building for now. “I think one day there could come a time for demands,” says Katie Davison, “but right now I think demands would fracture and divide people.... We need a movement of solidarity that is about values first, and we’re still coming together and finding out what we all agree on.”

There is, of course, a danger that with so much ebb and flow, the movement won’t be sensitive enough to recognize when that moment is reached, or that the Occupation will focus too much on education and empowerment, descending into a navel-gazing stupor. The emphasis at Liberty on the experiential has so far been a politicizing force, its creative chaos a blessing—but for how long? Already many early Occupiers have grown frustrated with what they call the fetishization of life at Liberty, with merely holding the square. “It’s become acceptable just to be at Zuccotti Park,” says Yotam Marom, “but now we need to up the ante. The direct action needs to shift gears again—it can’t just be symbolic. It has to be a true disruption of business as usual.”

Early in the Occupation, Nation writer Jeff Madrick urged the Occupiers to “go to where the injustice is,” and they have—to Harlem to protest the NYPD’s stop-and-frisk policies, to Verizon’s corporate headquarters to protest on behalf of CWA employees, to wherever New York Governor Andrew Cuomo sets foot to protest state budget cuts and his refusal to extend a state millionaire’s tax, and to branches of big banks to noisily withdraw their patronage in favor of credit unions. If there is some meaningful convergence between traditional socialdemocratic politics and the anarchist-inflected focus on experience, perhaps it lies in these direct actions. As the members of a new generation put their bodies on the line, they discover that their languishing talents can be deployed in the pursuit of justice. What’s a name for this—organized anarchy or socialism with a beat? What matters is that it’s working for now.

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## A Great Green Wall for Africa?

*The push to build a metaphorical wall of trees holds great promise for Africa—and the world.*

by MARK HERTSGAARD



ZINA SAUNDERS

At first the women weren't sure they could do it. Or should do it. Many in the village agreed. Digging holes, planting trees, being leaders—weren't these men's jobs?

"Everyone said we were crazy," recalls Nakho Fall, a stocky, vivacious woman in a red-and-white print dress. With a dozen women neighbors and their children, Fall is seated beneath a shade tree in Koutal, a village in western Senegal where goats and chickens amble across the sandy lanes that separate one household from the next. At 11 in the morning, it is already blazing hot, though in a month's time the rains and humidity of summer will make today's weather seem sublime.

The men of Koutal could not plant the trees, Fall explains, because they were already occupied. Some worked in the nearby salt factory, transported there by beat-up vans that did not return them home until dark. Others had migrated to Dakar, the distant capital, in search of whatever jobs they could find.

But something needed to be done. Trees were disappearing in Koutal, and with them much else. "We didn't even hear birds singing anymore," says Fall.

None of the women beneath the shade tree are familiar with the term "climate change," but all affirm that Koutal's weather has grown more forbidding in recent years. Persistent drought has turned the soil dry and hard. It has also grown salty.

Although Koutal is located fifty miles from the Atlantic Ocean, two "arms" of the sea extend inland all the way to the village. The Senegalese government lacks precise data on how much the sea has risen, says Adama Kone, an agricultural extension agent, but soil tests indicate that seawater has penetrated the underground freshwater table, increasing the soil's salinity and making it harder to grow crops.

“Taste it,” says one woman, pressing her index finger into the chalky white earth. “You will see we are telling the truth.”

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Defying local stereotypes, the women of Koutal decided to fight for their village. With seedlings and technical expertise supplied by the Senegalese government and foreign donors, the women spent six years transforming 290 hectares of land from bare, crusted soil into a thriving agro-forestry reserve. There, they harvest timber to sell in the local markets while also growing millet and other crops to eat. Incomes and food production have risen substantially, and the women look to the future with a new sense of confidence.

“We are very proud that our children will benefit from this land,” says Adam Ndiaye, a hearty grandmother. “And they will know this work was done by women.”

Little did the women of Koutal know it, but by planting trees to save their village they were also building part of what advocates are calling the Great Green Wall of Africa. At the moment, this wall is more vision than reality. If it gets built, a Great Green Wall could be a game-changer for Africa—a solid advance in the fight against not only the emerging threat of climate change but the enduring scourges of poverty and hunger. Much depends, however, on which version of this wall gets built. Will it be, as some African heads of state have urged, a literal wall of trees stretching across the continent like a long and narrow plantation? Or will it be a more metaphorical wall that brings to scale such local successes as the achievements in Koutal?

These questions should be front and center when diplomats arrive in Durban, South Africa, this month for the next round of international climate negotiations. Two years ago, the Copenhagen climate negotiations ended in failure and recriminations, as the United States and other big polluter nations refused to limit their greenhouse gas emissions. But the success of grassroots initiatives like Koutal’s and the prospect of establishing a Great Green Wall across Africa, suggest that there are practical solutions to the climate crisis, if one knows where to look.

And not a moment too soon. The horrific famine unfolding in the Horn of Africa is the latest reminder of what scientists have been saying for years: Africa is the continent that will suffer first and worst from the extra heat and drought that climate change will unleash over the coming decades. Of course climate change is hardly the only reason that 750,000 people—half of them children—are projected to die in the Horn in the coming months, according to the United Nations; Somalia, the epicenter of the famine, has been plagued by civil war and a nonfunctioning government for years. But this famine was brought to a head by the worst drought to afflict Somalia in sixty years, a drought that has also brought widespread deprivation and hunger to neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia, two relatively peaceful and stable countries.

With Africa projected to get even hotter and drier in the years ahead, the need to prepare seems obvious. As does the need for fresh approaches. Rather than dispatching emergency food aid at the last minute—which lets Western governments and citizens feel good about themselves but does little to address the root causes of hunger—are there solutions that will help Africans avoid such dire circumstances in the first place?

That is one rationale for the Great Green Wall, an idea that in its present incarnation was proposed by Olusegun Obasanjo, the Nigerian president in 2005. Obasanjo’s vision was quite literal: he urged planting a fifteen-kilometer-wide (nine-mile) strip of trees across the width of Africa to prevent the

Sahara Desert from expanding southward as climate change intensifies. Extending from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east, this wall of trees, it was said, would protect the densely populated Sahel region just south of the Sahara, where tens of millions of poor farmers and herders face the same hot, dry conditions plaguing Koutal.

African heads of state endorsed Obasanjo's vision in 2005, and the idea gained international traction when British Prime Minister Tony Blair urged Western governments to place greater emphasis on fighting poverty in Africa and shed the paternalism that had soured past efforts. In the spirit of collaboration between partners, African and European leaders established the Africa-European Union Partnership on Climate Change, which in 2007 adopted the Great Green Wall of the Sahara and Sahel Initiative (the project's official name) as its Priority Action No. 2.

"The Great Green Wall is an African-owned flagship initiative that will fight desertification, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and climate change while also tackling rural poverty and food insecurity," says Abdoulaye Dia, executive secretary and CEO of the Pan-African Agency for the Great Green Wall.

But over time, the initial vision of the Great Green Wall has drawn criticism from scientists, nongovernmental organizations and others who argue that it embodies a top-down approach to development that fatally undervalues the importance of ecology and local people. Planting what amounts to a vast tree plantation across thousands of miles of African drylands is bound to fail, the critics warn. Young trees need care to survive: watering, pruning, protection from animals. That requires giving local people the incentive to provide such care, not to mention irrigation facilities for which—oops!—there often is no water supply.

"There was a great razzmatazz in the 1970s around the same basic idea, and it was a catastrophic failure," says Dennis Garrity, director general of the World Agroforestry Centre, an international agricultural research institute known by its original acronym, ICRAF. "It sounded good to [African] heads of state, and [the foreign aid that funded it] was a great money maker for the forestry departments of African governments. It was, 'You give us the money; we'll plant all the trees you need.' So the forestry departments went out and planted millions of trees. And of course, the vast majority of them soon died."

Rather than a wall of trees, Garrity and other agricultural and development experts urge a more metaphorical Great Green Wall, one that champions a grassroots-driven, science-based approach to environmental restoration and sustainable development. Tree planting remains central to this vision, but it will be integrated with local food production and livelihoods, as in Koutal. The goal is to reverse land degradation as well as increase crop yields, rural incomes and food security. What's more, this vision of the Great Green Wall includes a mosaic of projects throughout the Sahel, whether or not they line up neatly on a map to form a "wall" across the continent.

There are plenty of success stories a metaphorical Great Green Wall could draw upon. In its report "Sustainable Land Management in Practice," the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) catalogs scores of them, including one example—the regreening of millions of acres in the Sahel by farmers who grow (not plant) trees that regenerate naturally among their crops—that I detailed in these pages (see "Regreening Africa," December 7, 2009).

Garrity and his ICRAF colleagues refer to these and other similar techniques as "evergreen

agriculture,” which they define as “a fresh approach to achieving food security and environmental resilience...[by integrating] tree species into annual food crop systems.” Growing trees interspersed with crops is actually an old practice in Africa; it lost favor with the arrival of “modern” farming techniques from industrialized nations but is making a comeback. Dubbed “intercropping” by modern agronomists, it relies on trees and their leaves to maintain a green cover on cropland throughout the year; this, in turn, improves the soil’s structure, fertility and capacity to absorb water—all good things.

One tree that has contributed to extraordinary results is a species of acacia called *Faidherbia albida*. Indigenous to Africa, this tree takes nitrogen out of the air and “fixes” it in the tree’s roots, producing a protein-rich foliage that fertilizes the soil when the leaves fall. It’s like having “a fertilizer factory in the fields,” Mariko Majoni, a small farmer in Malawi, told Garrity. *Faidherbia albida* also has a unique growing cycle: its leaves shed in the early rainy season (in effect, springtime) and regrow when the dry season begins (autumn). Thus, the tree doesn’t compete with crops for light, nutrients or water. Numerous peer-reviewed studies have documented that yields of maize, the most widely grown crop in Africa, have improved when it is intercropped with *Faidherbia albida*, with increases often topping 100 percent.

But even an apparent miracle tree like *Faidherbia albida* is not the right answer everywhere; each local situation has its own characteristics. The women in Koutal, for example, also achieved yield increases of more than 100 percent but with a very different tool: peanut shells.

Peanut shells are very easy to come by in Koutal; the village sits at the edge of the vast peanut-growing plain of Senegal. That fact led Kone, the extension agent, to investigate whether peanuts’ chemical properties include a propensity to absorb salt. His initial research seemed encouraging, so with help from a microloan charging 10 percent interest, the women bought a machine that separates peanuts from their shells. The nuts they turned into peanut butter, which they fed their families or sold to neighbors. The shells they hauled to the fields and spread on the soil like fertilizer. Then they intercropped their corn and millet amid the young trees and bushes they were planting and nurturing.

The experiment proved out. In 2007 plots of land that had been covered with peanut shells yielded 570 kilograms of corn per hectare versus only 150 kilograms per hectare on land that had gone without shells—a nearly fourfold difference. Millet plots registered a two-and-a-half-fold difference. By 2008, as overall production doubled, the ratios were less dramatic (because less salt remained in the soil) but still substantial: corn yields were two and a half times larger on plots with shells; millet yields were one and a half times larger.

The increased yields vindicated the one man in Koutal who had been willing to assist the women. Louis Charles Ndao is a retired soldier who had visited the village while serving in the army in the 1970s. Returning in 1996, he was shocked by how degraded the area had become. He tried to persuade the village’s young men to join him in restoring it, he recalls, “but they had no interest.” So he sought to recruit women, though he was careful to respect village sensibilities. “I told the women, Don’t argue about this with your husband,” says Ndao, a sinewy 54-year-old. “If he says don’t come, then don’t come. Soon they will see the results and change their minds.”

Eventually, 190 women joined the campaign, drawn by the evidence that trees were putting more money in the participating women’s pockets. That is important, not only because women typically have lower incomes than men in Senegal (and in Africa as a whole) but also because women tend to

spend their money more prudently.

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“It is not safe to give money to a husband,” says Elizabeth Loupy, 38, who wears a turquoise head wrap above a wide, smiling face. “We invest money in the household. A husband will spend it elsewhere.”

Where? On drink?

All the women rush to answer at once, and the chatter is so dense the interpreter finds it hard to follow. Eventually one voice rises above and declares, as the other women nod in agreement, “He might take a second wife!”

The Great Green Wall is too good an idea to be allowed to fail, its supporters say. But can its stakeholders—African and European governments, development agencies, NGOs in Africa and Europe and, above all, the ordinary Africans in whose name the idea is advocated—come together around a shared vision and a means of achieving it?

That question hovered over a conference in June where the major players discussed next steps. The location, Dakar, was significant. Senegal’s aging president, Abdoulaye Wade, has long been an adamant supporter of the literal vision of the Great Green Wall. In fact, according to his former aide Dia (the executive secretary of the Pan-African Agency for the Great Green Wall), it was Wade who named the Great Green Wall when President Obasanjo outlined the idea to fellow heads of state in 2005. Now it appears those heads of state remain committed to Obasanjo’s literal vision, and none more so than Wade, whose government was represented at the Dakar conference by military fatigues-wearing officers of the Senegalese forestry department.

But the Western donors whose resources are needed to finance any Great Green Wall—the EU, the Global Environmental Facility of the World Bank, the FAO—believe that the literal vision is doomed and should be replaced by something closer to the metaphorical vision described above. They are also concerned about organizational issues. Three African entities—the Pan-African Agency, the African Union and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States—have at various times claimed to be leading the Great Green Wall effort.

Moreover, the literal vision of the Great Green Wall turns out to rest on a basic scientific mistake. High-resolution satellite images captured by the US Geological Survey show that the Sahara Desert is not, in fact, advancing southward like a wave. Rather, says Gray Tappan of the USGS, “there are many specific places where poor land management has led to severe land degradation”—which suggests that the metaphorical vision is a superior response. As Tappan says, “These blotches of degraded land are what need targeting, not the entire border of the Sahara and the Sahel.”

Years of such push-back, especially coming from potential donors, appear to have caused African leaders to modify their visions of the Great Green Wall, if only rhetorically. Indeed, to hear Dia tell the tale, no one is more committed than he to ensuring local participation. “The Great Green Wall is for the local population, and it must be made by the local population,” he says. “That is our slogan.” But Dia, like other African civil servants who may want to do the right thing, has a dilemma. A geologist, he understands the scientific arguments against the literal vision of the Great Green Wall. But to embrace such arguments would alienate his patron, Wade, and other heads of state who have endorsed the opposite point of view.



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