

## ABSTRACT

NIKKI ROSE WEICKUM. *The Rhetoric of Democratic Constitution: A Comparative Social Movement Analysis of Occupy Wall Street and Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign.* (Under the Direction of Dr. Matthew May, and Dr. David Rieder.)

This project begins in the spirit of Kenneth Burke's "perspective by incongruity," where juxtaposing two incongruous publics, one an electoral campaign, albeit a grass roots one, and the other a protest movement based on anarchist principles, gives us the opportunity to explore two different philosophical modes of democracy that nonetheless found themselves on the same goal; to engage the multitude in a more direct democratic practice. The potential revealed by this comparison might subsequently reveal a potential for understanding and producing successful discursive constructions of social movements, but also reveals an underlying, and shared barrier to democratic practice in that both fail to embody their democratic goals in their uptake of representational structures. This paper examines the movements of Occupy Wall Street and Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign as one multitude activated in different ways in order to consider the ways that the electoral machine, in contrast to the consensus model of OWS, is able to sustain an affective investment in dissent. Jenny Rice suggests that the problem of civic engagement lies in the way that discourses seek "feeling as the primary means of orienting," where "feeling becomes a substitute for action." Ultimately, Occupy Wall Street dedication to dissent as the message of the movement represents its greatest weakness, in the way that the Occupy movement has always been too easily reduced to economic protest alone. In contrast, Obama's "hope" and "change," both emphasize democracy as the message, not just the structure, where the displacement of a concrete referent is such that participants were encouraged to define the meaning of change for themselves, even as he problematically channels this

democratic potential back into the electoral process. The stakes of this paper are in the viability of representational versus direct models of democratic politics, where an activation of power of multitude towards a representational model actually provided a more integrated means of participation, and in the case of Occupy, consensus functioned rhetorically to gloss over the hierarchical power of an ostensibly leaderless movement.