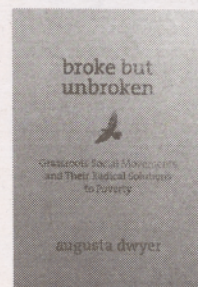


# Occupiers can learn from those who succeeded before

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I opened Augusta Dwyer's "Broke but Unbroken: Grassroots Social Movements and the Radical Solutions to Poverty" on October 6th. It was the morning Occupy Portland began. For weeks I'd followed Occupy Wall Street coverage: articles, interviews and tweets either optimistic or pessimistic, enthusiastic or embittered, angry or dismissive. Some politicians



**Broke but Unbroken: Grassroots Social Movements and the Radical Solutions to Poverty**, by Augusta Dwyer, 176 pages

even if concentrated wealth is reflected in West Hills mansions and Sunset Highway Porsches. Portland is a city known for its natural beauty, gray climate, vibrant arts and music. Yet like many cities, Portland suffers deindustrialization aftershocks and is propped up by a flimsy service economy. Unemployment ranks among the top in the nation, as do the figures for Portland's homeless population.

As demonstrators met under the Burnside Bridge, their noisy carnival ensued with chanting and costumes. Some sign-carriers had concrete demands (Reinstate Glass-Steagall!), while others shouted snarky or vulgar slogans, excited by the prospect of protest. Dwyer's book found a welcome home in my back pocket, baptized by Northwest rain. An independent journalist, Dwyer traveled to Brazil, Indonesia, India

and Argentina to track their grassroots movements' impacts on the global community.

In Brazil, Dwyer narrates the experiences of Paulo Barros Da Silva. Da Silva joined the Landless Rural Workers Movement after working land for years with no prospect for ownership. Da Silva knows what it means to occupy — he lived for years in a tent camp, *un acampado*, before winning land rights. This man's struggles and successes mirror those of the larger movement, a strategy employed throughout Dwyer's book.

"Occupy! Resist! Protest!" is one slogan cited by Dwyer, who examines movements' development, their organizational structure and educational ethos, drawing upon another Paulo, Paulo Friere — well known for his 1968 "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." A forerunner in community education, Friere taught illiterate adults to read by focusing on their own experiences. Dwyer cites Friere, "It is not enough to teach 'Eva viu a uva' (Eva saw the grape), if we don't know Eva's position in the social context, who produced the grape and who profited from its production."

To give some context and scale, Brazil's Landless movement occupied 150 estates in April 2004, composed of 200,000 families. Dwyer discusses achievements from such grassroots movements and occupations, like land for the landless, alongside the possibilities of infighting and cooptation by political parties — "like a hug from a boa constrictor."

Another struggle over land is embodied by the Peasant Union of Indonesia, based in the world's fourth most populous country. The organization was born in response to deforestation (10 acres per minute) and anemic peasant rights within private- and government-owned forests. The author asserts that the Indonesian movement has since "won or reclaimed a million hectares of land from big plantation owners cultivating rubber, tea, palm oil and other commodities."

Dwyer rubs an interesting wrinkle into the fight for land and rights when discussing the presence of Big Conservation. These are international organizations who seek "protection" for the land — a noble-sounding goal which displaces those who live and

pursue livelihoods there. "Out of the 108,000 areas given official protection worldwide since 1910," Dwyer writes, "more than half were occupied or used by forest dwellers."

While preventing bulldozers and agrobusiness is one thing, displacement of small-scale farming that maintains biodiversity is another. Dwyer doesn't advocate divestment in The Nature Conservancy or The World Wildlife Fund, though she does assert destructiveness in top-down governments and NGOs alike.

In India, Dwyer brings readers from rural to urban. The National Slum Dwellers Federation, as part of the Indian Alliance, is composed of increasingly-common armies of the poor. Dwyer tells us that the world sees 200,000 people flee every day from countryside to cities. Eighty-five percent of city occupants in the Third World are slum dwellers, with one billion worldwide.

Dwyer bases her research in Mumbai, the world's slum dwelling capital according to United Nations data. Their slums are almost beyond fathomable, and the author employs camera-style moves for her descriptions: everything from close-ups (families fighting for better maintenance of common toilets) to panoramas of "marginalized lands edging mushrooming cities" and "customary wretchedness."

Again, Dwyer investigates large-scale successes such as the 70,000 families who've become housed through the efforts of the Indian Alliance. She also casts disparaging light onto foreign assistance packages called "tied aid" where governments tie aid money to spending on goods from their countries or other political gains. This mismanagement of funds and ineffective developmental assistance lead Dwyer to focus on micro-credit, as many writers do, but also on small-scale savings circles and crisis credit funds. Dwyer again chooses families whose experiences she tracks and universalizes.

Of the four grassroots movements, Argentina's seems closest to home in Portland. Argentina was an affluent country boasting a cosmopolitan capital city and a robust economy. Thrown into deep recession in 2001 by factors including financial speculation, Argentinians watched

the world's seventh-largest economy shrink by fifteen percent and their poverty rates nearly double in a year. Perhaps 100,000 Buenos Aires residents, *Los Porteños*, took to scarp-picking as their only means of income. The middle class shrank and many became unemployed and unhoused.

Dwyer examines the framing mechanism that led poor Argentinians' to shift blame from themselves to capitalism itself. Through capitalism, large populations of factory workers saw their livelihoods disappear. Yet the factories still remained and the workers' knowledge did too. So why should their work stop, they asked. Why not keep making tires, ships and breadsticks?

So Argentinians formed the grassroots National Movement of Factories Recovered by Workers. Since then, cooperatives have occupied many factories and reopened them. Their new power structures are worker-oriented, with democratic elections and decision-making. Oftentimes factories boast equal pays "regardless of jobs (employees) do or responsibilities they take on." Dwyer acknowledges that many factories may not turn huge profits, though balance sheets change when no longer focused on "owner costs" — the need for large profits after paying wages and expenditures.

Dwyer closes with an idealistic note about the Argentinian workers which applies to each of her grassroots movements. "The worker-managed enterprises of Argentina thus offer a glimpse into a future where the creative energy and spirit of the working class is liberated and the exploitation of the majority for the profit of a minority is a thing of the past."

Though far from exhaustive, Dwyer's "Broke but Unbroken" offers an excellent lens to frame movements of Brazil, Indonesia, India and Argentina. For protestors here in Portland, and at Occupy Wall Street, there will be no magic formula — only lessons to learn and knowledge to share.

*A copy of this book will be available to Portland residents through the pedal-powered library, Street Books ([www.streetbooks.org](http://www.streetbooks.org)).*



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