

Occupy Wall Street protest

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1. Introduction

Several weeks ago my three year-old granddaughter, Adelaide, announced to me on *skype* that she had learned two new words: “protest” and “jail”. Her acquisition of this vocabulary stemmed from her being taken by my son on a crisp fall afternoon to visit the throng of people camped out in Zuccotti Park, recently renamed Liberty Square, in Lower Manhattan. The inspiration of the Arab spring, Spain’s 15M and the wave of European outrage (indignation) -- from Athens to Brussels--against the banks, the corporations, the politicians and all those held responsible for the unrelenting economic downturn had finally traversed the Atlantic. Precedents also included the massive protests earlier in the year in Madison, Wisconsin against the right-wing anti-union governor there. On September 17, protesters headed first to the stock exchange in lower Manhattan and then to Wall Street, the iconic centers of US finance capitalism. Soon, the swelling revolt and police overreaction and arrests, captured in Adelaide’s new words, “protest” and “jail”, provided the US version of Los indignados, Occupy Wall Street [OWS], with the publicity boost which was always a necessary part of its strategy.

In July of this year Adbusters, a Canadian anticonsumerism group issued in its magazine to overwhelm lower Manhattan with 90,000 protesters on September 17. “Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?” it provocatively asked. But the real promotion of the protest took place among a small group of artists, activists, writers, students, and organizers. They gathered in late summer in an artists’ loft in lower Manhattan New York to discuss a radical plan for change. The presence of foreign veterans of earlier protests this year galvanized the group, infusing it with an internationalist spirit and connecting it with, among others, the protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and Spain’s popular uprising begun in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol. The group included Americans, Egyptians, Spaniards, Japanese and Greeks.

The original group of about 30 people included local organizers, as well as those who’d taken part in uprisings all over the world. For example, a Spanish couple was present in this gathering. In the spring they had joined the protests in Puerta del Sol against the deep recession and the failed response to it of the Socialist government and the worst unemployment rate in Europe - 20%. The

movement spread throughout Spain and beyond in Europe and when the couple returned to the US, fresh from this experience, they were brimming with ideas on how to organize a similar protest in New York City. Among them was the notion of creating a general assembly like the ones in Spain, a signature feature now of the OWS protest.

Thus, the lessons of Egypt, Greece, and Spain coalesced and catalyzed the original Wall Street protest. Marina Sitrin, a writer and activist who helped organize Occupy Wall Street credits the Spanish and other foreigners who arrived with protest and occupation experience over the past year with “[opening up] a world of possibility we might not have been able to imagine before.”¹ In the following days the signs held by marchers in New York City confirmed the protest’s broad geographical influences: “Turn Washington Square [in Greenwich Village Manhattan] into Tahir Square; Zuccotti Park is our Puerta del Sol”. Young Spaniards continued to arrive to share their summer experiences in the Spanish encampments in Madrid and Barcelona, and to offer suggestions on strategy and tactics.

US Media attention, when it was dedicated to the protest at all, was at first dismissive or even hostile characterizing it as a theatrical lark for unemployed riff-raff, aging hippies and self-indulgent college students. Then, because of the dogged resolution and organizational skills of the growing number of participants -and aided by police overreaction- coverage of New York’s protest and that of other major cities increased dramatically. The phenomenon had crossed the threshold of media respectability and begun to be taken seriously and even regarded sympathetically.

Over the past month of October the phenomenon mushroomed, drawing hundreds into New York City from across the country, from as far away as Denver and Los Angeles, and then rolling across the US, spreading to some 150 other cities and commanding the attention of the global media. Trade unions, including those representing the local branches of teamsters, plumbers, iron workers, and construction trades, transit workers, teachers, communications workers, and service employees have added heft to a movement that was seen at first by many blue collar workers as dominated by callow, self-absorbed youth. Celebrities regularly appear- from filmmaker Michael Moore to economist and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz.

There is clear overlap with the attitudes of many in the Democratic Party and, in general, the party leadership sympathizes with the OWS message condemning Wall Street’s sins. President Obama has declared that the “people are frustrated and the protesters are giving voice to a more broad-based frustration about how our financial system works.” On the day OWS successfully resisted the attempt by the mayor and NYC police to evict them from the park, the White

¹ Andy Kroll, “How Occupy Wall Street Really Got Started,” *Mother Jones*, 17 October 2011, <http://motherjones.com/politics/2011/10/occupy-wall-street-international-origins>

House declared that Barack Obama would make the OWS movement part of his 2012 presidential campaign strategy against the Republicans. Many Democratic politicians publicly support the protests and recognize the validity of a phenomenon which has tapped into the public's festering anger over a political system that protesters claim rewards the rich to the detriment of the working class. This is a populist theme now emphasized by the White House as well as Democrats in Congress. In fact, a Congressional Democratic committee is currently seeking supporters to sign a petition, stating that "I stand with the Occupy Wall Street Protests".²

On the other hand, some in the Democratic Party remain wary of the potential impact of the OWS -especially if the protests turn more disruptive or violent; the protesters are also treading a thin line with the Democrats who, after all, rely on Wall Street for significant campaign contributions. For example, at the end of October Obama raised a total of \$15.6 million from Wall Street banks and other financial firms, more than twice as much as Republican frontrunner Mitt Romney. It is thus conceivable that the OWS will have less success than the Tea Party had in integrating into a mainstream political party. It is also not clear whether the Democrats' cautious embrace of OWS will solidify and add political clout to the movement in the way that senior Republican politicians and the right-wing media anointed the Tea Party as the vanguard of the Republican Party, helping it become an organized and potent political force.

However, the protest is already sharpening the differences between Republican and Democrats and highlighting their competing themes; this clarifying confrontation could well continue into the general election in 2012. For many Americans the OWS has emerged as a welcome antidote to the Tea Party, which had heretofore monopolized the expression of visceral outrage as a counter to the all pervasive hypocrisy and fecklessness of mainstream politics.

The OWS is the latest incarnation of a strain of US populism which is highly critical of the status quo and conventional politics. The two phenomena have certain basic elements in common. For example, they exhibit a visceral anger: neither phenomenon is renowned for favoring an attitude of ironic detachment. Both movements have taken to the streets with their message and like the Tea Party, the OWS has a tendency toward uncompromising positions. Both share resentment at the way the banks got bailed out by the government; as one protester's sign had it: "Banks get bailed, people get nailed".

But the similarities pretty much end there. The OWS does not come even close to the fierce, visceral hatred of the federal government that is true of the Tea Party; the former believes that government has an important role in protecting the

² Eric Lichtblau Democrats Try Wary Embrace of the Protests, *The New York Times*, 10 October 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/us/politics/wall-street-protests-gain-support-from-leading-democrats.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

well-being of the nation's citizens and maintaining level playing field. But OWS is focused on changing the system as it relates to cozy relations between corporations and politicians; this will surely become one of the bedrock principles of any emerging OWS political agenda. The Tea Party, on the other hand, would preserve basic US capitalism but like -as one of its heroes, Grover Norquist, has said- works to reduce the size of the government until it can be drowned in a bathtub.

Tactically, unlike the Tea Party, OWS -at least up to now- has evinced a disdain for pragmatic moves within mainstream politics, displaying as much contempt for the system as whole as the Tea Party has for moderation within the US conservative movement.

Moreover, the Wall Street protesters believe that low taxes on the well-to-do is an important factor in the dramatic socio-economic inequality of the US today and want the rich to pay their fair share of taxes, unlike the Tea Party whose opposition to taxes -and absolutely any new ones- is an article of faith. The OWS is centered intensely on jobs for the unemployed and the underemployed; the tea party is obsessed with the debt and the yearly deficit (both of which indeed have increased alarmingly over the past four decades: the debt at 14 trillion [fourteen billions] has risen from 40% to 100% of GDP and the deficit is now at 1.3 trillion [1.3 billion] or 9.3% of GDP).

The right welcomed the Tea Party and the Republican Party embraced it to the extent that they have been able to exercise a veto over the party's candidates. However, when OWS emerged, conservatives in the media and politics were quick to dismiss the protesters as a scruffy mob of malcontents and then became scathingly and consistently critical of the protests. For example, Eric Cantor, the House majority leader, called the protesters "a growing mob," and Herman Cain, a Republican presidential candidate, said the protests are the work of "jealous" anti-capitalists.³

In a globalized age, OWS is both indebted to movements abroad and is enhancing their impact. Indeed, two main sources of the nascent US protest movement are those that drove the Arab Spring and the Spanish 15M: the need to conquer injustice and invisibility and to force the powers that be to acknowledge that human dignity, as defined as one's moral worth, is irreducible.

On October 15, in solidarity with the recent demonstrations in the US and influenced especially by the previous occupations in Madrid and Barcelona beginning last May, activists led a massive and unprecedented outpouring of international solidarity in marches around the world to register their own protests against economic injustice, joblessness, political collusion and the corruption of granting impunity to financial malefactors. Notably, and bearing testimony both

³ Lichtblau, "Democrats Try Wary Embrace"

to the globalization of both capitalism and its critics and the degree of organic organization inherent in these movements, the protests coalesced in record time over a few days and then unfolded punctually (and for the most part non-violently) in over 900 cities.

Back in New York, the OWS, with its infectious energy, resurrected chants in English and Spanish from the 1980s protests against US Central American policy (“El pueblo unido jamás será vencido”), the large turnouts its actions and marches, demonstrated the phenomenon’s greatest strength so far: the ability to unite disparate individuals around a politically autonomous platform in order to project their discontent. Some argue that, in the intermediate term at least, this lack of social and ideological cohesion could become a weakness. Moreover, despite some class and occupational diversity, it is still mostly a white people’s affair. In recognition of this some outreach is occurring to other marginal and ethnic groups in the US.

2. Description of the OWS protest

OWS may be said to have consciously or unconsciously take a leaf from the manual of the Situationists, a group of left-wing militants founded in 1957 which had an important influence on the unprecedented French general strike of May 1968. Influenced by Marxism, and Calling itself the Situationist International (SI) movement they advocated using the construction of situations to alter consciousness. And achieve alternative life experiences to those admitted by the capitalist order. In the May 1968 revolts, the Situationists asked workers to occupy the factories and to manage them with direct democracy through workers’ councils composed of delegates whose mandate could be revoked instantly by popular consent.

The OWS protest in New York City is impressively organized at the ground and tactical levels. There is the transplanted Spanish concept of a people’s general assembly which had been hugely popular in Spain. The assemblies were constituted as a leaderless, “horizontal” non-hierarchical grouping of people who gather to discuss pressing issues and make decisions by pure consensus. In Spain, they not only formed in the cities but also in neighborhoods, in some cases organizing to stop home evictions or immigrant raids. At first the idea perplexed the Americans. But thanks to the insistence of the Spaniards, the idea caught hold and OWS assemblies now meet daily to deal with all manner of issues -from park safety to food preparation.

In addition, there is the exhilarating -almost tribal- sound of the “human” microphone, in which the crowd repeats the words of the speaker to those in the rear, decisions made by consensus, a medical center, lending library, web site

and even a newspaper, *The Occupy Wall Street Journal*. Although there are now indications that a rough cohort of leadership is forming to make decisions, the general rejection of the role of leadership and the focus on “followership” is part of this new mass awareness. Indeed, a tacit goal of OWS is to construct a novel architecture of public consciousness.

But without an overall strategic organizational structure it is yet to create a movement going forward. At this point it is a protest without a solid infrastructure or money and is up against a corporate sector and political system that has lots of both.

3. Nature of the OWS

The OWS protest is still rather vague and inchoate, not yet a full-fledged movement. It appears more an anguished cry from the heart, giving voice to previously muted discontent, anger and despair- and to which many Americans can relate. It is a visceral expression of a lack of faith in the system rather than a clear set of political objectives enshrined in a coherent ideology. We are witness to a work in progress, more of a process than a product, and at this juncture this is its unique worth and perhaps what will sustain and reinforce its impact over time.

This very lack of specificity has the media and pundit class daily parroting the question: “But what do they want?” as if not having a list of “demands,” or set of legislative recommendations -your garden-variety five-point program- undermined their seriousness of purpose and effectiveness. But the protesters essentially respond as a 15M participant in Puerta del Sol did last summer to a similar complaint: “Prescriptions are not our responsibility.... we are not politicians or media pundits.... Doing something about this disaster is your job and you’re not doing it”

4. Factors triggering the OWS protest?

There are multiple sources of dissatisfaction in the country, many of which coincide with similar protests against economic injustice and political corruption in Europe, the Middle East and around the world this year. Specifically, in the US it includes people who put their faith in Obama as the personification of their hopes to undo the damage done to the country during the Bush years. The economic crisis, including educational debts acquired by now unemployed university graduates, sharpened the consciousness of injustice among the young and unemployed who then recalibrated, placing their hopes in the creation of a mass movement rather than in an individual to rectify their grievances.

But they have now become disillusioned with White House capitulations to conservatives and by administration compromises in suspending the unforgiving laws of capitalist survival to bail out Wall Street rather than come to the aid of its victims. Washington not only saved the financial sector with over \$700 billion in emergency funds but refused to hold it accountable in a meaningful way with new regulations. All the while it has often exhibiting a sublime indifference to the fate of ordinary Americans or at best a or a fateful impotence in failing to provide similar help to needy Americans who have lost their jobs and/or their homes.

The protest places the main responsibility for the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and the suffering it has caused to millions of people in the US and abroad squarely at the door of Wall Street and its denizens. This has provided the incipient movement with an overarching theme to capture its outrage: those responsible for the crisis have enjoyed immunity and impunity, not only escaping punishment and any adverse consequences of their bad decisions (which have impacted everyone except the guilty) but indeed profiting from the crisis they created—a circumstance which OWS is clamoring for the government to rectify. The protesters want to see that banks are held accountable for reckless practices, that the rich pay a fairer share of their income in taxes, and that the governments focus on finding jobs for the unemployed.

Beyond this critique, there is an element of the protest which understands economic justice is bedrock necessary for rectifying other social injustices and reforming the ills besetting US society. It was Martin Luther King who once said of the struggle for civil rights struggle in the US: of what does it avail black children to sit next to white children in school or for their parents to vote in elections if the family cannot afford shoes to walk to schools or polls. “Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism,” King had said, “but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all of God’s children.” King, like the protesters now saw the problem of basic rights of US citizens as much an economic question as a social or legal problem and it encompassed the poor of all races. Frustration and anger among the working and the middle class now find expression in these protests that lie outside the confines of traditional US institutions.⁴

In fact, the backdrop for the protest is the growing evidence that the current economic and social deterioration in the US is both circumstantial and structural.

Indeed, the real value now of OWS has been to turn a harsh spotlight on the deterioration of US society and the devastating plight of the nation’s jobless, homeless and poor, something others with more responsibility and power had refused to do. Recognition of a problem is always a necessary first step to resolving it. Incredibly, a serious discussion and debate on the short and long-term crisis of the US have not happened in any consistent or focused way until the advent of

⁴ Chris Hedges, “A Movement Too Big to Fail”, *Truthdig*, 17 October 2011.

these protests. Moreover, the casual, unformed nature of the protest has allowed them to appeal to and corral a broad spectrum of people who rally around OWS' general critique of the current ways of doing business, the attendant injustices to average Americans and what it sees as the deterioration and the embedded contradictions of contemporary US society.

The basic causes predate the severe recession and anemic, halting recovery of the past three years, but were certainly accentuated by it. In the last three decades the US has declined from 6th to 23rd in the world in infrastructure development. The official jobless rate hovers at 9.1 per cent. or 14 million workers; another ten million are underemployed or have quit looking for work altogether —and this is increasingly looking like a permanent fixture in US society. The OWS protest also occurs at a time when one in six Americans (more than the population of Spain) live in poverty and the country tolerates an appalling and worsening inequality. The top 1% of the population now pockets 25 % of the yearly national income and the top fifth possesses 84% of nation's wealth, leaving the bottom 40 percent owning an almost invisible 0.3 percent of assets. Looked at from another optic, the 400 wealthiest Americans have as much wealth as the bottom 150 million.

At the same time, the US political system is trapped in partisan paralysis. Grim social statistics are equally discouraging, reinforcing the protesters' anger. To cite just two: The US infant mortality rate is near the bottom of the world's industrialized countries. The nation currently ranks 47th (Spain, for example, places 11th). Life expectancy in the US is now three years less than Spain's, ranking 50th in the world (versus Spain in 17th place).⁵The protesters would undoubtedly second the acerbic American comedian George Carlin when he once observed about the American Dream: "You have to be asleep to believe it".⁶

In addition, public frustration is fueled by the growing rate of home foreclosures and repossessions affecting five million US homeowners. Some 3 million homes have been repossessed since the housing boom ended in 2006 and that number could balloon to about 6 million by 2013, when the housing market may "absorb the bulk of distressed properties."⁷

⁵ The CIA World Fact Book <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

⁶ Wikipedia: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/George_Carlin

⁷ "2011 Real Estate Market", February 25, 2011. <http://www.mid-michiganelderlaw.com/2011/02/2011-real-estate-market-recipe-for-a-housing-boom/>

5. Final thoughts

But, whatever the reasons for the joining the protest and whatever OWS is, it is still not clear what it will become or where it is headed. Will it catch fire or backfire?

Will it end up helping the Democrats or the Republicans? So far, the best answer is the one that Zhou Enlai, the Great Helmsman's great henchman, supposedly gave when US President Richard Nixon asked him to assess the impact of the French Revolution: "it's too early to tell."

In order to convert the protest into a genuinely powerful grassroots insurgency, going forward, it could benefit from a nation-wide organizational structure and financial backing, and needs to build on its human strengths and continue to expand its influence both numerically and geographically. To achieve this it needs to find ways - even through the harsh days of winter- to maintain and even accelerate its momentum through ongoing actions and creative confrontations. To gather steam, and influence the course of US political history the OWS needs to cultivate public opinion carefully and astutely—and avoid the fate of its populist rival on the right. The Tea Party movement is experienced declining support while the left-leaning OWS has shoved the right-wing Tea Party out of the political space currently reserved for indignant populists in the US. Latest polls in this regard show that US public favors the OWS protest over the Tea Party by 2 to one: 54 percent held a favorable view of the movement, compared to just 27 percent with a favorable view of the Tea Party.

So far there is a good argument that OWS will not be co-opted by unions, the Democratic Party or other established groups, but is a truly independent radical movement. Its early declarations have set put a premium on maintaining its independence. To be effective, however, OWS needs to prove the skeptics wrong and become politically relevant, eventually insinuating itself into traditional politics. It remains to be seen, however, if and to what extent it will influence the often weak and ineffective Democratic leaders and the Party's fortunes in the November 2012 elections.

How successful it becomes will depend on the reaction of the rest of society and its political institutions. Notwithstanding its internal self-generating drive, OWS' future course will be bounded by past US history and its contemporary trajectory, as well as that of the global protest movement. The movement is still a creature born of today's political environment and will need to be alert and flexible to take advantage of the shifting conditions in which it militates. As Karl Marx famously wrote in the 18th Brumaire (Dieciocho Brumario de Luis Bonaparte: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past". * One can only hope that

this progressive phenomenon, the most serious and widespread protest since the mass movement in opposition to the Vietnam war in the 1960s, meets with greater success in ending or curbing unbridled corporate greed than its predecessors half a century ago had in ending US involvement in bloody, costly, and unnecessary wars.

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