

Occupy Wall Street: Leading from behind?

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In-depth Report: [OCCUPY WALL STREET](#)

‘The streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes’ — Vladimir Mayakovsky[1]

If only...

What are Lefties to make of OWS? Is it ‘ours’? Where is it headed? Is it socialist? And what is it with occupations anyway?

“The global Occupy movement has put the spotlight on the real source of society’s problems ♦ the 1% ♦ and many people are sympathetic to its message.

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“Given the huge scale of the problems that need addressing ♦ centuries worth of environmental damage, including dangerous climate change; an economy on the verge of collapse and chronic social problems linked to inequality and alienation ♦ a democratically planned approach, using all resources available, will be vital.

“Some people might call this socialism.” — ‘[Socialism means power to the 99%](#)’, Ash Pemberton, Greenleft, 29 October, 2011

I have to admit that I’m very torn over the question of the importance of occupations as a tool of bringing about the kind of change necessary to avert even worse disasters than the ones the Empire has already inflicted on us. After all, occupations per se haven’t worked anywhere else that I know of.

Okay, they let everyone know that there enough people desperate enough to cause a stir and even risk life and limb, but beyond that what do they actually achieve, especially in the ‘Land of (the not-so) Free’? But clearly, if they spread they do frighten the state and they do represent a potential threat to the status quo, if, and it’s a big if, they lead to a more thorough-going involvement of at least one-third of the population, united in a common goal, the overthrow of the existing order and its replacement with some kind of sane and sustainable economic and political order. “Some people might call this socialism”. It’s obviously not possible for me to know how such a transformation could take place, circumstances will determine that should the situation arise.

The state, for its part must tread very carefully for the on the one hand it has to maintain the myth of democracy, the right to assemble etc, but on the other if occupations trigger more dangerous (to the state) challenges, then they will surely have to be crushed. Can a

grassroots mobilization occur rapidly enough to challenge the right of the state to repress?

And what of the role of the media that until OWS got too big to ignore, ignored it? How the current occupations are presented is crucial to their future. Sold by the media as a bunch of hippies, commies and the homeless spells disaster, and in part explains why OWS is so reticent to 'call a spade a spade' and instead talk in very generalized terms about its goals.

"For the last six weeks we have been meeting at the New York General Assembly...and we get about eighty to one hundred people...[where]...we discuss the economic crisis...debt, the stratification of wealth and try to formulate alternatives to the existing system which we see as flawed and having failed us." Marissa Holmes[2]

Ok, so for weeks they've been talking about stuff that we've already spent the last 150 years talking about. But for those of us on the Left, being red-baited is as old as being a Red. Get used to it.

The future of OWS

I hear that the NYC-GA has 'plans' or 'programs' up to the year 2014 but what these 'plans' or 'programs' consist of is a mystery to me. They could be a new layout for a tent city for all I know. As to goals, well here is some of what NYC-GA has already stated:

As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known. — '[Declaration of the Occupation of New York City](#)'. (my emph. WB]

So, OWS is advocating what? Better regulation of corporations? Separation of corporations from the state? Breaking up the corporations and doing what with them? What of the banking system? Break them up too? Create a single, state-owned bank? Get rid of money altogether?

As OWS states, without economic democracy there can be no true democracy but what is economic democracy? This is a fundamental question that has been asked for the past two hundred years and goes to the very heart of the socialist project.

I might add, that you will never see defenders of the status quo ever talking about economic democracy. As far as the defenders of capitalism are concerned, democracy is about the vote and little else.

So what does economic democracy consist of? There are two sides to this question: On the one hand we have democracy in the workplace and on the other, deciding democratically

how our resources are to be utilized for the good of all. Can this be done with a capitalist political economy, especially one dominated by gigantic financial, military and media corporations?

Let's face it, there is no other alternative to a now totally psychotic capitalism run by a gang of sociopaths other than some kind of socialism, some kind of sanity. The question is: what kind of socialism do we want at this critical juncture in the history of our species. Unless this issue is at the core of OWS and its debates, OWS has very little future as a catalyst for change.

OWS: Democracy in action?

OWS is an enigma wrapped in a conundrum, floating in a bubble created by TV-land and 'social media'. Trying to get a handle on where OWS is headed, especially now that it has several hundred offspring, is almost impossible. One thing is clear however, and that is rifts around the 'process' are inevitable, let alone over the objectives. This is as it should be, up to a point. However it looks like the good ship OWS might already be foundering on the rocky and ever-shifting shores of 'Democracy Land' unless its members get their act together.

"When I pointed out the contradictions these differences present to the Council's stated principles, the leaders of Sunday's teach-in insisted that the Spokes Council was the most participatory, democratic organization possible the same slogan they repeated last month about the General Assembly. I felt like I was watching a local production of Animal Farm." — ['A Chill Descends On Occupy Wall Street; "The Leaders of the allegedly Leaderless Movement"'](#) By Fritz Tucker

OWS and its offspring are unique. There are no historical parallels, especially one without a leadership or even a program. The [Chartist Revolt of 1848](#) had the *Charter* as the catalyst and the demands were pretty clear, if somewhat limited from a revolutionary perspective. Interestingly in the light of the currently 'vanishing middle class', it was British capitalism's ability to co opt its *growing* middle class that assisted the state in crushing the Chartist Revolt. It's also worth remembering that full-blown insurrections occurred, in a wave, right across Europe in 1848, with cities occupied, the army called out, the whole nine yards. None of yer ever-so polite encampment outside St. Paul's Cathedral thank you very much.

The central theme of Tucker's essay is the 'process' itself, never mind the unnamed objectives maintaining that,

"OWS's main goal should be to develop dialogic, democratic methods in the occupied areas, and to extend this way of life into every home, workplace and school, and in local, regional, national and international bodies." — Tucker

'Occupied areas'? What does he mean by this? Whatever we 'occupy' we do so because the state by and large, has not taken steps to remove us. We would need a Tahrir Square-size occupation and then some to disavow the state's objective of 'taking back the streets'. How are we to mobilize sufficient numbers that short of locking us all up, the state is denied the possibility of 'retaking the streets'? Just how do you turn 'occupation' into revolution? We are after all, talking about challenging the capitalist state for power, that is if we're serious about overthrowing the *status quo*.

And you have to remember what the original Tahrir Square occupation actually achieved, aside from removing one man? Nothing at all. If anything with a military dictatorship now openly running the state, they are worse off now than before.

But before it's even gotten to this central issue, it's clear that OWS has some serious internal contradictions to resolve, not the least of which is how it operates as an allegedly, collective, leaderless structure?

Tucker quotes the OWS' 'leaders' who claim that OWS is run using, "direct-democracy, non-hierarchy, participation, and inclusion. ♦ — The Spokes Council

And as Tucker so clearly demonstrates, OWS' allegedly leaderless, nevertheless has leaders who are indeed just that, with a hard core dominated by middle class white men. So what else is new?

"When my turn came to speak, I brought up the plans of ♦the leaders of the allegedly leaderless movement♦ to commandeer the half-million dollars sent to the General Assembly for their new, exclusive, undemocratic, representational organization. Before I could finish, the facilitators and other members of the OWS inner circle started shouting over me. Amidst the confusion, the human mic stopped projecting what I, or anybody was saying. Because silence was what they were after, the leaders won." — Tucker

There is a fundamental problem here, for OWS doesn't have any workable objectives around which a means of achieving them could be constructed. As Tucker's piece points out, OWS has already raised \$500,000 from donations (through a third party non-profit) but doesn't know what to do with it or who controls it! It's ludicrous.

OWS threatens to descend into a talking shop (if it hasn't already) but with everybody having their own private conversation.

Tucker ends his piece with,

"The ineffective and increasingly symbolic NYC-GA will most likely continue to hang around as long as the people who congregate in Zuccotti Park hold out hope for a more participatory, democratic society. The Spokes Council will only be more effective in its exclusiveness.. Let♦s hope the inclusive spirit driving the Occupy movement is not frozen out.

"Eventually one of the facilitators regained control of the crowd and explained that I was speaking ♦opinions, not facts,♦ which is why I would not be allowed to continue. He also asserted untruthfully that I had gone over my allotted minute. Notably, the facilitators and members of the OWS inner circle regularly ignore time restrictions. – ibid

Been there, done that. It's the way those with even a modicum of power without principle, behave. There will always be an 'expedient' reason why Tucker couldn't be allowed to talk. He was too late. He talked too much. He needed to be up there on the platform shutting other people up. It's the difference between what it takes to be a politician and to be a political activist and an involved citizen.

Most left parties operate on some kind of 'democratic centralism', itself a contradiction in

terms for it implies democratic decision-making and then centralized action, the idea being that 'free debate' arrives at a conclusion which then becomes the program but *articulated and controlled* by the 'leadership' and carried out by the general membership through their actions. Sounds fine but in practice it hinges on the quality of the leadership that in turn hinges on the ability of the membership to articulate a vision that the leaders can formalize into a *program of action*.

But as Tucker's experience shows, you have even less control over a 'leadership' that claims not to be one and one that seems to have emerged rather than one that formally reflects the views of the majority. The piece actually doesn't explain how OWS got its non-leadership, nor what to do about 'minority' views, eg Tucker's, aside from shutting them up.

If you should choose to accept this challenge:

That said, it's not that 'leaders' are bad per se but under what conditions do they operate as 'leaders'? The 'process' is intimately bound up with the objectives of OWS. Start out the way you mean to continue, should be the motto. No more political expediency. My own experience of being involved with the formal left, in the shape of the former CPGB is not very encouraging but it's largely the fault of the 'rank and file' members who, rather than get involved in the 'process' are quite happy for the 'leadership' to do the thinking for them. Until it goes pear-shaped, then the very undemocratic nature of the relationship between the 'leadership' and the members is revealed.

The issue of internal democracy, that is, the way the organization functions, is absolutely vital. A simple and effective method of ensuring that 'leaders' don't dominate debates and thus the nature of the program, is to separate the administrative functions of the organization from the decision-making process.

No more permanent 'leaders' running debates and discussions. Let the debatees elect their own 'leaders' to manage the debates according to agreed rules every time they meet. Then the kind of 'behind-the-scenes' shenanigans that Tucker describes in OWS can't happen.

Notes

1. [Vladimir Mayakovsky](#), 1893-1930, the 'hooligan communist'. Poet, agitator, educator, playwright, graphic designer and street artist and a real hero of mine since my art school days. A fascinating, immensely talented poet, and a complex and tortured soul who shot himself over a woman and the direction that the Soviet Union was taking.
2. Stanley Heller interviews [Activist Marissa Holmes about the General Assemblies of Occupy Wall St.](#) Recorded Sept. 21, 2011 Zuccotti Park, Manhattan.

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