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The Occupy Movement: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

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The Occupy Movement: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Abstract

The op-ed evaluates the successes and limitations of the Occupy Movement in the United States. Ronald W. Cox argues that the Movement was inspirational in directing media focus to the trends of growing inequality and the privileges and power of the one percent. The critique of establishment parties and progressive organizations was a key part of the Occupiers efforts to rethink the meaning of social change. The limitations of the Movement became evident, however, in its extremely decentralized structures that emphasized consensus over majoritarian decision-making, and in its refusal to acknowledge and hold accountable its own leaders.

Keywords

protest, one percent, Occupy, inequality

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The emergence of an Occupy Wall Street movement needs to be celebrated for several important reasons. First, broad-based movements with an explicit critique of class privilege are lacking in the United States. The Occupiers had a notable effect in shifting media and popular discourse toward growing inequality and the privileges of an upper one percent. By concentrating large numbers in urban encampments, the movement demonstrated the power of a straightforward appeal to populist outrage. Second, the movement's implicit critique of establishment parties and institutions resonated with a large number of people. After the first two months of occupations, over 50 percent of Americans polled expressed agreement with the basic proposition that the upper one percent had too much power in US society, and that government did not represent ordinary citizens, but instead powerful corporate interests. A Pew Research Poll taken during the occupations indicated that, for people under thirty, socialism had a more positive connotation than capitalism. At the same time, the Occupiers also contributed to the media "discovery" of the reality of a four-decade long stagnation of wealth for the working class, and an extreme concentration of wealth at the top. Studies by the Economic Policy Institute documented that the top one percent had more combined wealth than the bottom ninety percent.

A central theme of the Occupiers was that US institutions have failed us, and we need to look outside of the system for solutions to deep-seated structural problems that have been perpetuated by status quo arrangements. For many in the Occupy Movement, this critique was not only directed toward policymakers, but also toward liberal organizations whose inability to effectively fight against the concentration of power and privilege made them complicit in the worst outcomes. The very structure of the Occupy Movement was in part a response to the feeling of hopelessness in relying on existing organizations to change the system. What was being proposed instead was a process of empowerment that purported to give voice to those who were never asked their opinion about the direction of US society and its dysfunctional and corrupt political and economic system. The techniques used by the Occupiers eschewed lectures by experts in favor of passing bullhorns around the crowd so that individuals could participate in leading group chants that were designed to reinforce the central point about the perniciousness of class privilege. The objective was a "leveling" of political discourse so that people would listen to each other, instead of being convinced that their own points were correct and that others simply needed to follow.

In interviews, Occupiers often emphasized that the movement was not interested in advancing policies to change the system. Instead the goal was to create a space for a non-hierarchical movement whose process of consensus and mass participation would offer an alternative to the machinations of the failed institutions and policy process in Washington, D.C. The ideologies of the movement ranged from individuals on the political left—socialists, left-liberals and anarchists to some libertarians on the right of the political spectrum. The movement also attracted a number of people who were not particularly ideological, but who felt drawn to the anti-systemic critique of the power and privilege of the one percent. The entity which put together the one percent rallying cry, Adbusters, was itself a product of anti-institutional and anarchist thinking, with a lack of trust in institutional capacity or working with existing progressive organizations to change the system.

The Occupiers critiqued the establishment and were perpetually wary of being “captured” by progressive organizations such as trade unions or teachers unions, who appeared in several occupy movements to give support to the occupiers. Some members of the Occupy Movement, especially in Zuccotti Park in New York City, welcomed their participation at least initially. But a significant number of Occupiers worried incessantly that the aims of the Movement, and its own autonomy and purpose, would be watered down and taken over if “outside” organizations were allowed too much say in the direction of the movement. The friction between the occupiers and established organizations revealed the serious limitations of the Occupy Movement as a force for long-term mobilization and change. The Occupy Movement, with its own orientation toward consensus and participation as ends in themselves, proved incapable of taking the next step toward political mobilization that could develop effective strategies for changing the system.

In the early months of the Occupations, the Movement had their largest rallies due primarily to the mobilization of unions who marched alongside the Occupiers in New York City and Oakland. As many as 34 trade unions supported the Occupy Movement, and the Occupiers returned the favor with political mobilizations on behalf of workers. In Oakland, the Longshoremen cheered as Occupiers shut down the city’s port. In New York City, busloads of protesters from Zuccotti Park arrived at Sotheby’s to support the locked out Teamsters’ art handlers. Occupiers also marched with Verizon workers fighting concessions demands from their bosses.

But these actions of solidarity with the working class fizzled amid concerns that the unions were too bureaucratic, too top down, and would dilute the ability of the Occupy Movement to make its own decisions. Indeed, the aim of the Occupy Movement became increasingly distant even from the simple slogan put forward by Adbusters critiquing the power and privileges of the one percent. When Adbusters recommended adopting specific policy objectives, including a global one percent tax on equity trades, it went nowhere with the more than 82 deliberative bodies that had been carved out of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, divided by such titles as “Politics and Electoral Reform” to “Tea and Herbal Medicine.”

The fracturing of the general assembly into smaller deliberative bodies was consistent with the cultural politics of the group, which privileged individual differences and small-group communication and consensus over policy deliberation. As more time passed and the encampments stayed in place, the dynamics of the movement seemed much more focused on changing “how people live” than placing demands on the state for reversing attacks on the social safety net. It seemed to have become more of a movement for individual emancipation and spiritual and cultural enlightenment than a movement committed to fighting for social protection for workers and the poor.

Many in the Occupy Movement were encouraging people to live different lives, which was often wrapped in spiritual and monasterial-type appeals that were seen by some in the Movement as the best route toward facilitating a more permanent change in the dominant culture. The roots of these transformational aspirations, with an emphasis on consensus and its focus on individual aspirations and cultural emancipation as opposed to collective, majoritarian democratic decision-making, seem to derive from two different sources. First, the young organizers and activists

involved with the movement are skeptical of the more traditional forms of protests that make demands on the state. If the state itself is illegitimate and immune to transformation, then the alternative (for many of the Occupiers) becomes an Occupy Movement that can change the culture by its own set of practices, rather than by making policy demands on the state. This viewpoint lies very close to the libertarian insistence that only individuals can preserve their own freedom, with the best government being the most minimal government. Second, the Occupiers are critical of the top-down, bureaucratic nature of traditional unions. The wariness with which some approached the overtures of unions were an indication that the Occupy Movement was seeking to chart its own course independent of liberal organizations who were initially offering a great deal of political support to the Occupiers.

But ultimately the Occupy Movement cannot be easily reduced to the sum of its parts. There were some in the Movement who pushed for the Occupiers to take stances on public policy issues that would elevate the one percent sloganeering beyond street theatre and how to live one's life toward a broader engagement with the policy arena. Clearly the sense of the Movement that a broader transformation of the nation's political process and culture was necessary were rooted in the reality of long-term, systemic institutional failure by both conservative and liberal elites and organizations. The failure of both political parties and their domination by corporate interests, and the bureaucratic and top-down nature of union bureaucracies, accurately captured in the damning work of labor activist and writer Steve Early, are embodiments of what the transformationalists in the Occupy Movement were so worried about.

The Occupy Movement weakened itself by establishing a structure that eschewed majoritarian decision-making in favor of group consensus, which only served to allow a few individuals to block collective action that might have been supported by the majority. At the same time, by denying that the Movement had any leaders, the people that were effectively "leading" the Movement were never explicitly identified as such, meaning that they were accountable to no one but themselves. This left the Movement tied to a structure that appeared ultra-democratic on the surface, but in effect gave preference to individuals over collective decision-making.

Also, the Occupiers were so quick to dismiss state institutions and top-down bureaucracies that they too often failed to recognize that individual members of these institutions and bureaucracies were yearning to join an Occupy Movement that would allow them to break free of the limitations of status quo arrangements. In other words, had the Occupy Movement put class politics front and center in their analysis, the opportunities for expanding the scope and engagement of the movement toward a broader confrontation with capitalists and the state might have opened up.

Still, it's premature to say, as some liberals have, that the Movement is dead. The Occupiers had some significant accomplishments early on, and considering the vacuum in which they entered the urban encampments, their mobilizations and political actions, especially early in the Movement's history, proved to be an exciting portent of what a rallying cry of the 99 percent might enable in the future.