

The Occupy Movement: A Spirit in Search of a Future

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Is Occupy a “movement” in the sense of past movements, or just a passing phenomenon?

- Shares similarities with the past (below)
- All movements have a seemingly “fadish” or superficial quality to them (e.g., Nehru jackets and love beads for the “Hippies”); but underlying roots are stronger

What are its roots? Are there broader currents at work?

- Immediate catalyst: *Adbusters* July 2011 an "occupation" of Wall Street on September 17, but fed off Tahrir square in Egypt, and other deeper roots
- Recent economic crisis
- Environmental concerns
- Stagnant social mobility
- Cynicism towards politics/politicians and the mainstream media
- A sense that democracy has been hijacked by finance capitalism

Sign in New York

“I can’t afford to buy a
politician.”

Similarities to Other Movements

- Shares some similarities to earlier movements: Gandhi's "non-violence," Civil Rights (sit-ins), "Hippie" rejection of corporatism
- Anti-globalization/WTO protests of late 1990s/early 2000s (Seattle, Washington, Genoa, Quebec City); anti-war protests in 2003-04
- Wisconsin sit-ins to protest Republican efforts to roll back union rights (transportable tactics)
- The Tea Party movement?



Is America Still the Land of Opportunity?

“The suspicion that the answer is no inspires not only the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests that have spread across the nation but also a movement as seemingly divergent as the Tea Party.” Rana Foroohar, *Time Magazine*, November 14, 2011.

Anger, resentment, anxiety, fear.

Who are the occupiers?

- Primarily, though not exclusively, the young and educated
- “Time on their hands”
- Youth movements elsewhere: Middle East, Spain, Italy, Greece
- Every crowd is made up of a lot of different people

What the Occupiers are Not

“All this nonsense I’ve heard in the last two weeks about the Occupiers being naïve and confused, is so wrong. I have a Ph.D. in economics, and I can assure you that the people in this crowd today know more about economics – more about real economics – than all the stock brokers in these tall towers put together.”

From: Jim Stanford, CAW economist, at Toronto’s Bay Street in November, 2011

From Nobel Prize Winning Economist Jeffrey Sachs

“The young people occupying Wall Street and now protesting in several dozen American cities are not a "mob," the ugly deprecation thrown at them by Congressman Eric Cantor. They are channeling sentiments felt very widely throughout the country, indeed the world.”

Tactics and Strategy; Or does Occupy have a coherent message?

- No (in the sense of a set of formal demands)
- Democracy – as performance
- Strength and also weakness
- Big message may involve many messages
- Media (short-term, sound bites) wants to fit into existing “frames”

The Story of Georgia

- 31-year old performance artist
- Charging Bull statue, August 2, 2011
- Dress rehearsal for September 17
- Event morphed from a traditional protest to a non-hierarchical “horizontal” political event, a kind of anarchist form of general assembly

What has been the response of authorities?

- Variable
- Uncertain: Obama and Republicans positioning
- Cautious in some instances (Vancouver, Edmonton), aggressive in others (Oakland, New York)
- Legal remedies, pressure, reliance on seasonal circumstances
- Toronto judge's verdict: rights under the Charter, but not sufficient to override other rights
- De-legitimize through the media

US Responses

- "I think it expresses the frustrations the American people feel, that we had the biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression, huge collateral damage all throughout the country ... and yet you're still seeing some of the same folks who acted irresponsibly trying to fight efforts to crack down on the abusive practices that got us into this in the first place." – President Obama, October 2011
- "I think it's dangerous, this class warfare." Mitt Romney, October 4, 2011. "I'm just trying to get myself to occupy the White House."
- "I worry about the 99 percent in America," he said, later adding, "I understand how those people feel." Mitt Romney, October 10, 2011.
- A "legitimate effort." US Congressman Ron Paul.

What is the Occupy Movement's future?

- Street theatre; the “spectacle”; “The Slogan” (THE 99% AND THE 1%)
- Changed the conversation: focus on the elites
- Weakness: danger of becoming the issue
- Weakness: attrition
- Weakness: widely supported, but risks alienating natural supporters
- Weakness: the need to capture the state
- Strength: broader vision
- Strength: delegitimized system
- Strength: youth
- Occupy other places – or minds?

Thank You!