

The Future of the Occupy Movement

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The Occupy Movement, which has already been hugely successful in thrusting issues of inequality and corporate power into the public discourse, faces a critical juncture. As many of the larger encampments in New York, Oakland, Philadelphia and Los Angeles are shut down by the police, activists have been searching for the tactics to move beyond Occupation to Phase 2 of the movement. Some say that the movement now should evolve into the political arena, supporting policy ideas, running candidates for office, and putting pressure on politicians and corporations. Similarly, others argue that the next step is to develop a specific list of demands, which presumably could further policy initiatives and protests.

A different tactical response is to create what essentially would be a non-violent guerrilla movement in American cities. For example, Kalle Lasn, the Adbuster magazine publisher and originator of the Wall Street encampment idea, reportedly urged a new “swarming strategy of surprise attacks against business as usual.” The Chicago occupiers have resolved to have an event a day throughout the winter, such as defending foreclosed homes, sit-ins, banner drops, building parks, providing supplies to the homeless, or guerrilla theater and art. In the same vein, longtime social movement scholar and activist Francis Fox Piven foresaw some time ago that the movement would develop new phases, utilizing “other forms of disruptive protests that are punchier than occupying a square,” or “rolling occupations of public space.”

This article suggests another alternative, one that focuses on creating sustainable alternative decentralized institutions that reflect in microcosm the egalitarian, democratic vision of society that the Occupy Movement has put forth. Such a strategy would be combined with a continual presence in the streets and parks around issues of injustice such as foreclosures.

While determining the tactics of the next phase is critical to keeping the movement alive over the next weeks and months, the broader strategic goal is that of developing a truly long-term movement to transform society — measured not in seasons, but years or even decades. That task is one of sustainability. How can the Occupy Movement (OWS) develop the organizational, cultural and institutional forms to sustain a long term movement, yet also maintain its dynamism, horizontalism, direct democracy, creativity, activism and transformative vision? No American social or political movement of the twentieth century has been able to do so.

The 1960s civil rights and 1930s CIO trade union movements initially had much of the activism, creativity and direct democracy now exhibited by OWS. They utilized street protests, sit-ins, factory occupations and boycotts. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and some of the radical CIO unions practiced direct, participatory democracy. Their movements changed American society and resulted in lasting, meaningful reforms — which if OWS succeeds in emulating would be a remarkable achievement.

Those movements failed to achieve many activists’ goal of an egalitarian society, however. Perhaps

more importantly, they were unsuccessful in sustaining their creativity, dynamism, activism and vision in some non-bureaucratic forms or institutions that could continue the long-term fight to transform an unjust society into a just one. They seized the radical moment and achieved important reforms, but failed to sustain their transformative vision. Can OWS avoid that fate over the long haul?

There is no road map or magic formula for success in that project. Indeed, OWS's spirit of creative experimentation and of an openness to new ideas must be at the heart of any effort to move beyond what has been accomplished in the past. As Naomi Klein put it in her speech to OWS, being horizontal and deeply democratic "are compatible with the hard work of building structures and institutions that are sturdy enough to weather the storms ahead." But what lessons have we learned to help us in the long term task?

Lessons of OWS

Five main attributes of OWS have contributed to its massive success and provide the basis for its continuation as a radical alternative in the future.

1. Presenting a Narrative, World View or Declaration — Not Specific Demands

Until OWS, the left had not set forth an alternative narrative to that of the right or democratic party liberals. Such a narrative explains to people why we are in our present mess, who and what is responsible for our predicament, and offers a broad solution. The right has such a narrative: the evil is big government and the solution is to cut taxes and government spending. The liberal narrative tends to be that the lack of government oversight and a rigid adherence to free market capitalism is the problem and that more government regulation is the answer. The left has all too often simply presented a mélange of programmatic demands and a defense of government programs.

OWS presented a competing narrative that resonated with millions of people: corporate power and greed got us into this mess, the only way out is for the 99% to stand together to demand equality, justice and fairness. It is that broad perspective, narrative or worldview — as opposed to a laundry list of demands — that helped change the political debate. People see the world through a broad lens or framework — to convince or move them is not primarily a logical or factual process, but one of providing a lens or framework with which to view reality. OWS did just that.

OWS was able to connect equality to liberty in a manner that allowed people to see gross inequality as morally unjust. As others have observed, since the 1970s, both conservatives and liberals have focused on individual liberty, privacy and autonomy (albeit in different areas, guns versus reproductive freedom), while paying little or no attention to equality. Indeed, the original 1787 Constitution omitted any mention of equality, focusing solely on liberty, and requiring a bloody Civil War and the post-war Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to include equal rights in our basic governing document. OWS focused the nation's attention on the fact that for most folks (the 99%), individual liberty is incomplete or even a hollow shell without social and economic equality and justice, as international human rights principles now recognize. Thus, OWS's narrative refocused the national debate on equality.

Finally, that OWS's basic document was a declaration which seemingly tracked the July 4, 1776, Declaration of Independence — substituting corporate power for King George, issuing a list of grievances against corporate power instead of the King, and announcing occupation of the illegitimate power and not independence from it — emphasized that the goal was to set forth a narrative which would shift and galvanize the public debate and not simply present demands to the

government. Neither the OWS nor the 1776 Declaration demanded a list of reforms; rather they both highlighted the illegitimacy of the ruling regime, as did OWS's not seeking a permit to occupy the square.

Some have argued that while the broad critique was appropriate at the outset, now the movement needs more specific programmatic demands. While OWS has and should continue to involve itself in particular struggles around particular issues — for example stopping foreclosures — its uniqueness and vitality is contained in its ability to present an indictment of current reality and a broad, amorphous perspective on what should be done. The Occupy Movement can be thus viewed as a prophetic movement, reminding people of basic values. As OWS activist Katie Davison pointed out in *The Nation*, "We need a movement of solidarity that is about values first." These values are not foreign to the left, or for that matter to most Americans. OWS has recalled them to us, and any adequate movement forward will have to keep them before people's minds.

2. Political Independence

OWS, unlike many unions and progressive coalitions, chose not to focus on elections, the legislative process or lobbying. While engaging in the electoral arena or having an impact on legislation are important, OWS's contribution and vitality would be undermined by running candidates or engaging in lobbying. Rather OWS started in the streets (or parks) and ought to remain there as a beacon of hope for the future and a means of putting pressure on corporations and politicians from outside the political system.

As a constitutional and human rights lawyer, I recognize the value of specific reforms that can sometimes be won in the electoral arena, in legislative forums or in courts. But I also have seen that often the most important reforms are achieved by pressure from outside of the system, by people acting independently of political parties or lobbying efforts and that entering such established arenas can often hamstring social and political movements. OWS has already had an effect on specific issues such as the Keystone XL pipeline issue, as Naomi Klein recently pointed out. But even more importantly, OWS has stirred for many the desire to move beyond specific reforms, to act on our aspirations for a fundamentally different type of society that is democratic and egalitarian. Only by maintaining its independence from parties and traditional institutions can OWS continue to inspire those hopes and dreams.

3. Non-Violence, Creativity, Experimentation and Inclusiveness

I include these attributes as one because they are all related. The occupation encampments encompassed a diverse group of very creative activists who debated various issues and a range of solutions without dogmatic, fixed preconceptions. Many of us were captivated by the energy, creativity and ability to reach consensus exhibited at the numerous occupations around the country.

4. Visible, Not Transitory Presence

The occupations, unlike a one-shot demonstration, had continual visible staying power. As Naomi Klein and Francis Fox Piven have pointed out, the occupiers put no end date to their presence, and said they were staying put. That made them an ongoing real presence which could not be ignored, neither by the media nor by public opinion. This is in contrast to recent demonstrations that have been easily forgotten, when they reached public consciousness at all. Moreover, OWS has been able to bridge the gap that often separates virtual from actual politics. It utilized media technology, but because it was a constant presence, there was a continual feedback loop between the images that were transmitted across various media and the ongoing presence of the occupation itself.

The first definition of the term “occupy” in Webster’s dictionary is “to engage the attention or energies of,” and the occupy movement succeeded by its continual visual presence in engaging the public’s attention. Even without the space in those cities in which the encampments have been shut down, the occupy movement must find ways to continue to visually occupy the attention of millions of Americans, the media, and the elite.

5. Creating Alternative Models of What a Democratic Egalitarian Society Might Look Like

Perhaps the most critical component of OWS is its creation of alternative communities which reflect the egalitarian, democratic world that its activists seek for the future. Sometimes referred to as “pre-figurative politics,” this perspective seeks to create in microcosm the alternative models that reflect the future world that the activists support, while at the same time using those institutions to engage in direct action to change the current reality. By creating a community dedicated to solidarity, consensus decision-making, everyone’s participation, respect for everyone’s opinion, and equality, OWS attempted to demonstrate that another world is possible, not in theory but in practice.

That effort creates hope for a radically different future, which in many respects is more or equally important than winning particular demands. As Matthias Schwartz pointed out in a recent New Yorker article, “In the end, the point of Occupy Wall Street is not its platform so much as its form, people sit down and hash things out instead of passing their complaints on to Washington.” As the slogan around the encampment went, “We are our demands.”

Future

When I went to the Occupy Pittsburgh encampment — which is still ongoing — I asked several people there what they saw as its future. A young English graduate student’s answer lay in the community, in developing a concrete alternative rooted in equality, solidarity and democracy. For her, the OWS was a way of her expressing her vision of the future. To me, the long term viability of the OWS movement as a transformative movement lies in the creation of these communities, which not only directly practice what they believe, but seek to reach out and effect the public consciousness through direct action. Perhaps Noam Chomsky said it best in his speech to Occupy Boston:

“The Occupy outposts are trying to create cooperative communities that just might be the basis for the kinds of lasting organizations necessary to overcome the barriers ahead and the backlash that’s already coming.”

There are many groups which are trying to create alternative models in microcosm: food co-ops, farmer markets, cooperative renewable energy projects. Indeed many of these groups have united in an umbrella formation known as the solidarity economy. But none of these groups have captivated the public as has OWS, and very few combine direct action with community building.

Other movements in the past have attempted to create such democratic, egalitarian institutions. As William Greider has pointed out, the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century created a series of ingenious agricultural and credit cooperatives, which were eventually destroyed by the money classes and bankers. He asks, “what is it we can build that is parallel to that cooperative movement?” But we must also seek to learn why that cooperative movement was unable to survive, and what can be done differently. So too, SNCC and its supporters created community-controlled day care centers, and at least in one prominent case, an agricultural cooperative, but these efforts were also destroyed and we need to understand why the civil rights movement was unable to sustain these radical, democratic structures.

Yet an important accomplishment of the Occupy Movement is to rekindle the hope that these alternative communities of solidarity can grow.

There are reasons to be hopeful. The bankruptcy of an economic order which threatens our very existence has led to the growth of co-operative, environmentally friendly, alternative institutions. Moreover, there currently exist organizations such as the National Lawyers Guild, Center for Constitutional Rights, or City Life/Urbana Vida, a Boston anti-foreclosure group, that have for decades sustained a radical vision and practice, as well as an anti-elitist, democratic internal structure, which OWS and other groups can learn from in building the creative cooperative structures they envision. Lessons can also be gleaned from movements around the world which have created such autonomous communities, whether it be the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Brazilian landless movement, or the Mondragon cooperatives in Spain.

Hopefully OWS can create organizational forms that combine its democratic, egalitarian origins with audacious, ongoing direct action, an overall narrative that continues to express values of solidarity, equality and democracy, and political independence and survive as a model of how a just society would operate. If OWS can do so over the long term, it will have made a major contribution, not simply to transforming the public dialogue, but to birthing a new society.

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P.S.

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