

On Occupy movements in the United States - What Does Democracy Look Like?

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It was the night of September 17, and more than 2,000 people filled Zuccotti Park. As night fell, we began the General Assembly. It was intense, inspiring and went on for hours. A consensus was reached: we would occupy. Thousands of twinkling hands went up in silent applause, and then we began a chant—no, a song, really, a call and response. The facilitators asked, “What does democracy look like?” Thousands responded, “This is what democracy looks like!” We were singing, jumping up and down and dancing, full of joy and a sense of our own power. I smile now as I write these words, a smile filled with the same joy and power. It is not a reminiscent or retrospective joy but a very real and present joy of our mutually discovered power.

Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of people were gathering in directly democratic assemblies in cities, towns and villages across the United States. These movements emerged in response to a growing crisis, the heart of which is a lack of democracy; people do not feel represented. The movement’s goal is not based on creating a program or a political party that will put forward a plan for others to follow. The purpose is not to determine the path the country should take but to create the space for a conversation in which all can participate and determine together what the future should look like, while at the same time attempting to prefigure that society in our social relationships.

One of the most powerful things the Occupy movements in the United States have accomplished, as have movements in Greece and Spain, is to make democracy a question. To simultaneously challenge and refuse the privileging of economic interests over political and social ones. What these movements declare is, “Democracy first!” This is not how the political system under which we currently live functions. Under capitalism, decisions are made by those with economic power and then political decisions follow to support them. The Occupy movements turn this trajectory on its head and say, No! First comes democracy; first people decide, and this political process is inseparable from economic and social issues. That is the slogan of the 99 percent. It is a framework of the majority—the people lead. This is the meaning of democracy, coming from the Greek, *δημοκρατία* (*dēmokratía*), “rule of the people,” which says nothing about economic interests predominating. This relinking of the political, social and economic relationships is at the heart of the Occupy movements. So what does this mean?

These new democratic forms do not ask governments to be more democratic. They are inherently outside the framework of institutional power. Democracy is not possible as long as it is linked to a form of exchange based on hierarchy, inequality, oppression and exploitation. People cannot be physically or emotionally free as long as capitalist hierarchies and structures determine those things that are most fundamental to our work and lives. Capitalism and democracy are incompatible. This is not to oppose reforms, but it does mean, for example, that instead of proposing legislation or getting behind a candidate who is against foreclosures (as one is supposed to do in a representative “democracy”), the movement disrupts foreclosures and occupies people’s homes so they are not evicted. In Greece, hospitals are being occupied so that people do not have to pay the newly imposed cost of healthcare. Sometimes these actions change laws or modify rules, but the point is to create new ways of relating—not looking to institutional power but instead creating power.

The creation of this power does not accept the value system of capitalism, where the market determines the worth of a person's house or health. The movement refuses to participate in that logic. Our logic, grounded in prefigurative forms of democracy, is to take care of one another. This is a different value system, one based on solidarity and real democracy. These relations break with capitalist production and create new values. The movement accumulates not capital or surplus but affect and networks of solidarity and friendship. This new value is seen on the subjective level, in the change in people and their relationships with one another, but also concretely, in new ways of surviving and helping others survive based on these relationships.

The future is a question—as futures should always be. But one thing is certain: democracy is now also a question.

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P.S.

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