12 July 2012

The Occupy Movement's Search for Alternative Power Structures

The Occupy Movement has been criticized for a lack of strategy, leadership, and concrete demands. However, a closer look at its philosophy and actions at the grassroots level shows that this is just what the movement wants.

Prepared by: Chrisella Sagers and ISN staff

"People, when organized, have enormous power, more than any government . . . . Change in public consciousness starts with low-level discontent, at first vague, with no connection being made between the discontent and the policies of government. And then the dots begin to connect, the indignation increases, and people begin to speak out, organize, and act." – Howard Zinn, 2007

Contextualizing Occupy

The Occupy Movement presents itself as a response to the political and economic crises sweeping the globe. On the surface, the impetus behind it is well-known – as the American economy began shifting from a manufacturing to services-oriented foundation, income inequality exploded. Between 1992 and 2007, for example, the top 400 individual incomes in the country grew by 650 percent, with nearly half of that increase coming in capital gains. Meanwhile, in the eyes of Occupiers, the average wage of middle class workers stagnated, unionized manufacturing jobs disappeared, and the economy became more dependent on what Alan Greenspan called "growing worker insecurity." When, in 2008, the Wall Street financial crisis became a Main Street recession, tolerance for the inequality that had characterized American society – once propped up by rising house prices and abundant jobs – suddenly began to evaporate.

Although the home-grown Occupy Movement defines itself as a generalized protest against what it sees as unjustified (and growing) inequality, it also sees itself as something more. The movement further opposes what it perceives to be an increasingly illegitimate political system – one that no longer serves the interests of the people. In this sense, the 2008 financial crisis and its consequences are seen as a breaking point -- i.e., a breaking point of discontent that began with the simultaneous, costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the eyes of movement adherents, soldiers who had put their lives on the line were now coming home to find an inadequate health care system and their homes in foreclosure; middle-class workers were being laid off or had their wages severely cut after years of service; and college graduates were unable to find jobs, thereby having to depend on parents who were increasingly worse off themselves. In the meantime, critics further argued, the banks, whose

actions had caused the crisis in the first place, propped up their losses with "free" taxpayer money, largely because the government deemed them "too big to fail."

From disenfranchisement to communal action

For the Occupy Movement, the legitimacy of the American political and economic systems is being undermined primarily by the absence of genuine democracy. As a captive of the bank accounts of special interests, the state now seemingly dictates policy from the top, or so the Occupiers argue. In response, they have sought to embody and exemplify an alternative form of power. As we have been reminded often, in the Occupy Movement there are no leaders directing the action. Instead of the "vertical" exercise of power, we have participants creating a "dialogue space" that is ideally "horizontal." What we see expressed here, in other words, is a profound collective ambivalence about the saliency, adequacy and fundamental fairness of traditional forms of power – forms that have come to short-circuit direct person-to-person communications, and therefore the possibility of active, direct and consensus-based democracy.

The Occupiers' "Horizontalism" thus aims not only to correct what it sees as an imbalance of political and economic power, but also to open up the space of public life in a way that has never been fully accessible to certain [minority groups](). It additionally seeks to provide a solution to growing civic defeatism and disengagement, primarily by creating grassroots institutions designed to address local needs.

The above conception of power obviously has its critics. But it does help account for one particular criticism that is often leveled at the Occupy Movement – i.e., that it seemingly has no concrete demands or goals. To an Occupier, however, demanding something inevitably entails looking to a central authority to provide it, which then runs the risk of legitimizing that authority. That's why, as quixotic it might have seemed, Occupiers first took over a public park in order to create the public space needed for public dialogue and participatory democracy. [As Marina Sitrin writes](), "We see the gaze of Occupiers focused not on [asking for or meeting] the demands of the 'other'[,] but on and amongst themselves." This philosophic commitment to creating an alternative political space also explains why no Occupiers have run for high political office, in sharp contrast to the Tea Party.

Well, does all of the above merely represent a theatrical "politics of gesture," made possible by the very capitalist juggernaut that so many decry, or does it have genuine utility for real people living real lives? A sympathetic observer can argue that the movement has hit a nerve with the American public, particularly in extolling a kind of meaningful political engagement that is less and less evident in American life. "At its most radical," [writes Jedediah Purdy](), "the idea here is that representative government…is a deep compromise for democracy, and that our representation is so captured and corrupted as to be scarcely democratic at all. This only gets worse when representative government…adds a layer of delegated government—the agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, and quasi-independent entities like the Federal Reserve—that doesn't answer directly to the people at all, and is quite imperfectly responsive even to elected officials."

Political power for Occupiers thus lies in constructing communities that reject 'decision makers' at the top of heavily layered power structures. It also involves taking on local problems autonomously – i.e., surrounding homes to disrupt foreclosure auctions, farming unused land, foregoing university courses to pass along knowledge through free public classes – and, in the process, aiming to disrupt unresponsive political and social structures at these more fundamental levels.

Reactions to disruption

Disrupting established structures, naturally enough, means that the vested interests of elites – as a

self-interested, self-protecting and self-perpetuating class of people – are threatened. That then typically invites a response. Indeed, Wall Street and Washington alike have reacted to the Occupy Movement with both fear and dismissal. On the one hand, protestors have been portrayed as little more than disaffected and unrealistic youth who are too spoiled to take on "adult" responsibilities in an intrinsically power-saturated world. On the other hand, heavy-handed political leaders have directed police forces to crack down on and forcefully evict peaceful encampments, thus raising another power-centered question – who truly "owns" public spaces? An abstract entity known as "the public," which delegates its interests (and the power to interpret and enforce them) to the state, or the very boundary-challenging people who occupy the space in the first place? Is the latter group guilty of "power grabbing" too, or is their insistence on a new conception of political space – the creation an "unpolluted" and self-emancipating "safe zone," if you will – indeed legitimate?

Finally, it should be noted that status-quo responses to the Occupy Movement have not just been government centered. Private businesses across the country, including the New York Stock Exchange, have hired off-duty police officers to protect their interests, as private security guards with the full force of the law behind them (they are known as Paid Detail Units). Such a response further confirms that there is indeed a symbolic clash that's occurring between the Occupy Movement and the political and economic establishment. For those standing on the sideline, the questions that the clash inevitably represents are indeed profound. What is your conception of power? Are you ethically comfortable with it? Who owns it – self-appointed professional "wonks"? Is power intrinsically corrupt, or are there progressive, safe-space alternatives that point toward a next-step relationship we can have with it? And so the legitimate questions add up. If nothing else, the Occupy Movement has compelled many of us to ask existential questions with a new vigor and intensity. However, exactly how all this consciousness raising will ultimately affect how we exercise power in the future remains an open story.

Publisher

International Relations and Security Network (ISN)

---

http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=146474