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The Awakening in America

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A radical situation is a collective awakening. . . . In such situations people become much more open to new perspectives, readier to question previous assumptions, quicker to see through the usual cons. . . . People learn more about society in a week than in years of academic “social studies” or leftist “consciousness raising.” . . . Everything seems possible — and much more is possible. People can hardly believe what they used to put up with in “the old days.” . . . Passive consumption is replaced by active communication. Strangers strike up lively discussions on street corners. Debates continue round the clock, new arrivals constantly replacing those who depart for other activities or to try to catch a few hours of sleep, though they are usually too excited to sleep very long. While some people succumb to demagogues, others start making their own proposals and taking their own initiatives. Bystanders get drawn into the vortex, and go through astonishingly rapid changes. . . . Radical situations are the rare moments when qualitative change really becomes possible. Far from being abnormal, they reveal how abnormally repressed we usually are; they make our “normal” life seem like sleepwalking.

—Ken Knabb, *The Joy of Revolution*

The “Occupy” movement that has swept across the country over the last four weeks is already the most significant radical breakthrough in America since the 1960s. And it is just beginning.

It started on September 17, when some 2000 people came together in New York City to “Occupy Wall Street” in protest against the increasingly glaring domination of a tiny economic elite over the “other 99%.” The participants began an ongoing tent-city type occupation of a park near Wall Street (redubbed Liberty Plaza in a salute to the Tahrir Square occupation in Egypt) and formed a general assembly that has continued to meet every day. Though at first almost totally ignored by the mainstream media, this action rapidly began to inspire similar occupations in hundreds of cities across the country and many others around the world.

The ruling elite don’t know what’s hit them and have suddenly been thrown on the defensive, while the clueless media pundits try to dismiss the movement for failing to articulate a coherent program or list of demands. The participants have of course expressed numerous grievances, grievances that are obvious enough to anyone who has been paying attention to what’s been going on in the world. But they have wisely avoided limiting themselves to a single demand, or even just a few demands, because it has become increasingly clear that every aspect of the system is problematic and that all the problems are interrelated. Instead, recognizing that popular participation is itself an essential part of any real solution, they have come up with a disarmingly simple yet eminently subversive proposal, urging the people of the world to “Exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone. . . . Join us and make your voices heard!” (Declaration of the Occupation of New York City).

Almost as clueless are those doctrinaire radicals who remain on the sidelines glumly predicting that the movement will be coopted or complaining that it hasn’t instantly adopted the most radical positions. They of all people should know that the dynamic of social movements is far more important than their ostensible ideological positions. Revolutions arise out of complex processes of social debate and interaction that happen to reach a critical mass and trigger a chain reaction — processes very much like what we are seeing at this moment. The “99%” slogan may not be a very precise “class analysis,” but it’s a close enough approximation for starters, an excellent meme to cut through a lot of traditional sociological jargon and make the point that the vast majority of people are subordinate to a system run by and for a tiny ruling elite. And it rightly puts the focus on the economic institutions rather than on the politicians who are merely their lackeys. The countless grievances may not constitute a coherent program, but taken

as a whole they already imply a fundamental transformation of the system. The nature of that transformation will become clearer as the struggle develops. If the movement ends up forcing the system to come up with some sort of significant, New Deal-type reforms, so much the better — that will temporarily ease conditions so we can more easily push further. If the system proves incapable of implementing any significant reforms, that will force people to look into more radical alternatives.

As for cooption, there will indeed be many attempts to take over or manipulate the movement. But I don't think they'll have a very easy time of it. From the beginning the occupation movement has been resolutely antihierarchical and participatory. General assembly decisions are scrupulously democratic and most decisions are taken by consensus — a process which can sometimes be unwieldy, but which has the merit of making any manipulation practically impossible. In fact, *the real threat is the other way around*: The example of participatory democracy ultimately threatens all hierarchies and social divisions, including those between rank-and-file workers and their union bureaucracies, and between political parties and their constituents. Which is why so many politicians and union bureaucrats are trying to jump on the bandwagon. That is a reflection of our strength, not of our weakness. (Coooption happens when we are tricked into riding in *their wagons*.) The assemblies may of course agree to collaborate with some political group for a demonstration or with some labor union for a strike, but most of them are taking care that the distinctions remain clear, and practically all of them have sharply distanced themselves from both of the major political parties.

While the movement is eclectic and open to everyone, it is safe to say that its underlying spirit is strongly antiauthoritarian, drawing inspiration not only from recent popular movements in Argentina, Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Spain and other countries, but from anarchist and situationist theories and tactics. As the editor of *Adbusters* (one of the groups that helped initiate the movement) noted:

We are not just inspired by what happened in the Arab Spring recently, we are students of the Situationist movement. Those are the people who gave birth to what many people think was the first global revolution back in 1968 when some uprisings in Paris suddenly inspired uprisings all over the world. All of a sudden universities and cities were exploding. This was done by a small group of people, the Situationists, who were like the philosophical backbone of the movement. One of the key guys was Guy Debord, who wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*. The idea is that if you have a very powerful meme — a very powerful idea — and the moment is ripe, then that is enough to ignite a revolution. This is the background that we come out of.

The May 1968 revolt in France was in fact also an “occupation movement” — one of its most notable features was the occupation of the Sorbonne and other public buildings, which then inspired the occupation of factories all over the country by more than 10 million workers. (Needless to say, we are still very far from something like that, which can hardly happen until American workers bypass their union bureaucracies and take collective action on their own, as they did in France.)

As the movement spreads to hundreds of cities, it is important to note that each of the new occupations and assemblies remains *totally autonomous*. Though inspired by the original Wall Street occupation, they have all been created by the people in their own communities. No outside person or group has the slightest control over any of these assemblies. Which is just as it should be. When the local assemblies see a practical need for coordination, they will coordinate; in the mean time, the proliferation of autonomous groups and actions is safer and more fruitful than the top-down “unity” for which bureaucrats are always appealing. Safer because it counteracts repression: if the occupation in one city is crushed (or coopted), the movement will still be alive and well in a hundred others. More fruitful because this diversity enables people to share and compare among a wider range of tactics and ideas.

Each assembly is working out its own procedures. Some are operating by strict consensus, others by majority vote, others with various combinations of the two (e.g. a “modified consensus” policy of requiring only 90% agreement).

Some are remaining strictly within the law, others are engaging in various kinds of civil disobedience. They are establishing diverse types of committees or “working groups” to deal with particular issues, and diverse methods of ensuring the accountability of delegates or spokespeople. They are making diverse decisions as to how to deal with media, with police and with provocateurs, and adopting diverse modes of collaborating with other groups or causes. Many types of organization are possible; what is essential is that things remain transparent, democratic and participatory, that any tendency toward hierarchy or manipulation is immediately exposed and rejected.

Another new feature of this movement is that, in contrast to previous radical movements that tended to come together around a particular issue on a particular day and then disperse, the current occupations are settling in their locations with no end date. They’re there for the long haul, with time to grow roots and experiment with all sorts of new possibilities.

You have to participate to understand what is really going on. Not everyone will be up for joining in the overnight occupations, but practically anyone can take part in the general assemblies. At the Occupy Together website you can find out about occupations (or planned occupations) in more than a thousand cities in the United States as well as several hundred others around the world.

The occupations are bringing together all sorts of people coming from all sorts of different backgrounds. This can be a new and perhaps unsettling experience for some people, but it’s amazing how quickly the barriers break down when you’re working together on an exciting collective project. The consensus method may at first seem tedious, especially if an assembly is using the “people’s mic” system (in which the assembly echoes each phrase of the speaker so that everybody can hear). But it has the advantage of encouraging people to speak to the point, and after a little while you get into the rhythm and begin to appreciate the effect of everyone focusing on each phrase together, and of everyone getting a chance to have their say and see their concerns get a respectful hearing from everyone else.

In this process we are already getting a taste of a new kind of life, life as it could be if we weren’t stuck in such an absurd and anachronistic social system. So much is happening so quickly that we hardly know how to express it. Feelings like: “I can’t believe it! Finally! This is it! Or at least it *could* be it — what we’ve been waiting for for so long, the sort of human awakening that we’ve dreamed of but didn’t know if it would ever actually happen in our lifetime.” Now it’s here and I know I’m not the only one with tears of joy. A woman speaking at the first Occupy Oakland general assembly said, “I came here today not just to change the world, but to change myself.” I think everyone there knew what she meant. In this brave new world we’re all beginners. We’re all going to be making lots of mistakes. That is only to be expected, and it’s okay. We’re new at this. But under these new conditions we’ll learn fast.

At that same assembly someone else had a sign that said: “There are more reasons to be excited than to be scared.”