

<http://divergences.be/spip.php?article2615>



John Clark

"Occupy? Wall St.?"

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2011 - N° 28. Novembre 2011 - English -

Date de mise en ligne : Tuesday 15 November 2011

Copyright © Divergences Revue libertaire en ligne - All rights reserved

When Occupy Wall St. burst unexpected on the scene a mere month ago, many (and especially many in the mainstream media) had no idea what to make of it, and treated it as an incoherent outburst. We need to consider why this phenomenon was so perplexing to some, while so inspiring to many others. We need to see that the Occupy Movement does have a deep significance. Yet, we also need to be careful not to attempt to pin down its meaning too rigidly at this early point in its development.

It is crucial to understand that "Occupy Wall St." is a floating signifier. This means that although it may have a common core of meaning for many, it also means many different things to many different people. There is simply no way to pin down what it "really means." What it really means is everything it is, and everything it will become. Its various meanings at this stage of its evolution sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict.

This ambiguity should not be surprising. The most firmly-established political signifiers (Freedom, Justice, Democracy, etc.) have widely divergent meanings and have long been a battleground for contending factions. And signifiers for new social tendencies that spread rapidly through society are always immediately claimed and contested by diverse currents. This is what occurred with "the Movement" in the 60's. It happened again with the various post-USSR "Color Revolutions." And it is being repeated with "Occupy Wall St." now.

It is also not surprising that when Occupy Wall St. emerged, established political forces and mainstream media had no idea of what to make of it. These conservative apparatuses specialize in containing divergent forces and reintegrating them into the hegemonic universe of discourse. Thus, the dominant media were unanimous in proclaiming that the Occupation Movement (if, indeed, it even was a movement!) was unclear, and even hopelessly confused, about its goals. One heard over and over, "What do they want?" "What's their point?" "What are their demands?"

The problem wasn't that Occupy Wall St. wasn't making coherent demands, but that it was speaking a language these media were capable of understanding. The problem wasn't that Occupy Wall St. had no goals, but that its goals exceeded these media's impoverished conception of the meaning of a goal. The response of the mainstream media, in all its usual brilliance and eloquence, reduced basically to "OWS? WTF!"

Compare this to the typical response of these media to reactionary demands. The most incoherent statements are accepted as crystal clear. When the forces behind the most powerful technocratic state in the history of the world, the forces that continue to expand a huge global military-industrial apparatus say "we want smaller government," this is never questioned. The absurdity is merely passed on to the public. The right-wing is in favor of minimalistic global domination. They like very tiny totalitarian power. No problem there.

No one from *Fox News* to the *New York Times* will suggest that there might be even some minute little contradiction in such monumental absurdities. But when the Occupation Movement says that it wants to destroy political and economic domination by the corporate oligarchy, or that it wants to create participatory democracy, the media establishment is completely confused. What do they want? Why don't they have any real demands? Will they ever figure out what they're trying to do?

On October 14, NPR interviewed Eduardo Martinez, a senior at Florida International University, about the ideas of the Occupation Movement. He said, "We wholly embrace the notion of horizontal systems of democratic government, not vertical systems of hierarchical domination." This statement is clear, well-formulated, and radically critical of the

established oligarchical system. However, the NPR reporter helpfully transformed it into something vague, innocuous, and (let's be honest) stupid, for the benefit of NPR's presumably gullible audience. He said: "translation: average Americans, not Wall Street and the banking industry, need to be heard now."

Note that the reporter admits explicitly that he is translating this perfectly clear and coherent statement for NPR's listeners, who are presumed to be too politically-challenged to understand the original. According to the translation, it's all about being heard, about "speaking truth to power" for the millionth time, rather than about smashing that illegitimate, hopelessly corrupt power and replacing it with a qualitatively different form of power. It should be noted that during the report, we can hear in the background protesters chanting "support education, not world domination" Yet, there is, of course, no mention of the issue of "world domination" by the dependable reporters of Nationalistic Puppet Radio.

But let's get back to our floating signifier. In "Occupy Wall St.," what does Wall St. signify? It signifies at least four overlapping things. First, for a significant number of activists in the movement, those with the most coherent analysis of what "Wall St." presupposes, it signifies the global capitalist system. They see it as an immoral and irrational system that imposes hierarchical power on humanity and exploits the labor of the vast majority to deliver disproportionate benefits to a small minority. They take note of such significant facts as that it is capable of keeping over a billion people in absolute poverty in a world of abundance and affluence, and that it is in the process of pushing the biosphere toward ecological collapse, even as there are the means to fulfill all our material needs in a sustainable manner.

For many other activists "Wall St." signifies the global system of "corporate capitalism." The target in this case is not capitalism in general, but the dominant form of economic organization in late capitalism. Many of these activists have not thought through the question of whether the ills of capitalism can be separated from its corporate forms, while others think explicitly that it can be reformed or kept under control if corporations can be tamed. The basic assumption of the anti-corporate faction is that the economic dominance of corporations must be ended. Anti-corporate activists often support cooperatives and small businesses as an alternative to large corporations. Their critique is formulated in terms of size and scale, centralization vs. decentralization, rather than an analysis of capitalist exploitation of labor or appropriation of value.

A third group of activists mean by "Wall St." an economic oligarchy that dominates both the economy and the political system. The oligarchs are the very rich and the super-rich, the famous "one percent." This group does not formulate its goal as the abolition of capitalism or even the dominant corporate form of capitalism, but rather as the overthrow of the power of the economic oligarchy and a reversal of the trend toward greater and greater concentration of wealth in its hands. The members of this faction support a democratized political system in which capitalism, including the existing form of corporate capitalism, can be controlled better so that it can operate within limits defined by the public good.

Finally, there is a smaller minority of activists who mean by "Wall St." some particular devious or mysterious cause of economic crisis and decline. This diversified fringe of the movement projects on to our convenient floating signifier all its objects of hatred, resentment, paranoid fantasy and conspiracy theory. For Ron Paulite econocranks, it is the Federal Reserve Bank. For closet anti-Semites, it is the International Bankers. For diverse conspiracy theorist, it is the Bilderbergers, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, or the Lizard People. What the fringe members share is that each has a pet *bête noire*, so that systemic understanding and critique of the capitalist economic system or the economic oligarchy is not necessary.

The future of the Occupation Movement lies in the dialectic between the first three tendencies. The degree to which it will become a reformist, a radical, or a revolutionary movement depends on the balance between these perspectives, and the extent to which each can express itself in the thought and actions of the developing Movement. Those within

the final category tire quickly of the Movement's interest in social and economic justice, and the vast majority of the Movement tires quickly of them.

A large part of the significance of the Occupation Movement, is that, in focusing on capitalism, corporate domination, and the economic oligarchy, it can help bring the issue of class back to its rightful position in oppositional politics. Over the past few decades, we have made huge advances in incorporating issues of patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, nationalism, imperialism, and the domination of nature into radical politics (though we are obviously far from solving any of these problems). We need to continue to develop our analysis and practice further in all of these areas, but we also need to return with much greater seriousness to the necessary moment of universality that is embodied in class politics. The Occupy Movement gives us an ideal opportunity to do so.

Capitalism is a system of domination in which the vast majority of humanity is exploited and disenfranchised for the sake of the power and wealth of a minority of humanity. Even in societies in which formal political democracy exists in some degraded form, the economic system is an open dictatorship. This system was classically called "the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie," a term that has mystified many. However, it is a very clear and coherent concept. It means simply that the great majority has no democratic voice concerning how we work and what we produce through our labor. It means that a small unelected minority dominates the economic system.

In other words, it means something that is blatantly obvious to anyone whose mind is not poisoned by ideology. It means that the economy is a dictatorship and you and I are not the dictators. The export of jobs under globalization and the decline of membership in labor organizations in general and radical unionism in particular have drastically reduced the ability of working people even to moderate the functioning of this dictatorial system. Thus, the revival of class politics becomes ever more relevant in late capitalism. The Occupation Movement, with its emphasis on "corporate greed," the dominance of "the 1%," and the evils of economic inequality, brings class analysis back into American politics to a degree that we have not seen perhaps since the 1930's.

We come next to the other half of our floating signifier. What does "Occupy" signify? Once again, it signifies many things to many occupiers. It is important to consider not only the things that this powerful concept already signifies, but also what it is beginning to signify, and what it is capable of signifying

"Occupy," above all, signifies a rejection of conventional American politics and the embracing of a new politics of direct action. It signifies a revolution of DIY politics, an affirmation of self-expression, self-determination, and self-management of social change. This does not mean the acceptance of the naïve cult of immediacy that pretends that there can be social action without any mediations and without any forms of representation. What it means is an explicit rejection of the destructive, disenfranchising, immobilizing forms of mediation and representation that that dominant system of power imposes on us. "Occupy" is a rejection of the reigning politics of resignation, reformism, and retreat.

The Occupation Movement is an affirmation of the possibility of the Social Act. It is a practical refutation of the ideology of TINA, "there is no alternative." We know that there is an alternative because the Movement itself embodies that alternative and thus proves that it is possible. The Movement is a performative statement of its own ideals. It states the ideals in the form of beginning to put those ideals into action. The strongest argument for the possibility of a phenomenon is the actual existence of that phenomenon.

In its most visionary sense, the Occupation Movement is a reoccupation and liberation movement. It consists of the community taking back the territory, reoccupying that which has long under occupation by the forces of domination. This is why "Occupy Albuquerque" just decided to rename itself "Unoccupy Albuquerque." This signifies a growing awareness that our land has been occupied, our communities have been occupied, our minds have been occupied, and our bodies have been occupied. They have been occupied by the state and capitalism and need to be liberated

from that occupation. The promise of the Occupation Movement is that it will become a movement of reoccupation and liberation of our own lands and communities, our own sacred places, our own minds and bodies.

We cannot know far the Occupation Movement will ultimately take us in this direction of collective liberation, but we do know that it is already a major liberatory advance in the political culture. Given the crushing force and addictive power of the dominant institutions, the dominant imaginary, the dominant ideology and the dominant ethos, the very fact that the ideas and practice of the Occupy Movement have exploded onto the scene in over a thousand places seems almost miraculous. It is an indication that unimagined liberatory processes have been going on beneath the surface of this occupied continent. It means that in a multitude of places scattered across the United States of Amnesia, people are beginning to remember how to think and to remember what life and human community are really about.

In a time of oppressive occupation, such as the Nazi occupations during World War II, certain truths become clear to everyone. One of these truths is that under a system of domination, all political perspectives (including a supposed "apolitical" one) reduce to forms of two basic orientations. Each person who lives under that system is either a collaborator or a resister. This is not to deny that some collaborators inadvertently do much to undermine the system, or that some resisters do much to reinforce it. Nevertheless, each person, whether through an act of choice or by default, adopts the standpoint of either resister or collaborator. Either one goes through a crisis of conscience in which one recognizes that the system of domination is intolerably evil and goes on to oppose it actively, or one remains, by decision or indecision, an agent of that system.