

OWS: Reform or Revolution... and the Lessons from Egypt.

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The mass, momentum and potential of the Occupy Wall Street Movement are very exciting. As the “occupy” protests spread, we need to ask some very important questions about the movement. The main question is what is the long-term goal and aim of the movement with respect to the current politico-economic system. As this movement bravely confronts the many socio-economic and political ills of capitalism and the capitalist state, is its ultimate aim to reform and/or improve the capitalist system/capitalist state or is the goal one of all-out revolution and abolition of the system?

The debate over reform or revolution dates back to the early twentieth century. Though tactically in opposition these two positions share “a basic point of agreement: both approaches focus on the state as the vantage point from which society can be changed.” [1] Reform achieves a gradual transition to socialism through parliamentary means while revolution achieves a much more rapid transition through the taking of state power and the swift introduction of radical change by the new state. [ibid.] It should be stressed that mine is an altogether different understanding of revolution, which sees the state as a *central problem* rather than the means through which populist change can occur. Thus when I speak of revolution I refer to a type of social change that seeks, among other things, to do away with the formal State and replace it perhaps with a type of “collective power” or shared (i.e. rotational) governance by citizens committees or collectives, to give just one possible example. [2] That said, and notwithstanding different definitions and understandings of revolution, it is important to ask whether the OWS movement is aimed at reformation/rehabilitation of the system or at overall transformation.

Because the OWS movement is so broad, spread out and ad hoc, this can be hard to discern. Those participating in the occupy protests in North America—“the other 99 %”—come from every walk of life and have myriad grievances. Participants include the unemployed, the underemployed, the homeless, the poor, indigenous peoples, impoverished racial and ethnic minorities, indebted university students, people opposed to imperialist wars in Iraq, Afghanistan etc., and many other individuals. While they come from diverse backgrounds, collectively they/we can be said to represent a single class—the underclass; the “have nots.” It remains to be seen if “the other 99%” share a common long-term goal(s) and agenda and what that long-term goal(s) is. Do the majority want to completely transform the capitalist system and change it outright or do they want to reform capitalism, so that it is more humane, inclusive and generous? Are the majority of individuals participating in the “occupy” protests anti-systemic or are they upset and/or disappointed that the system failed them and let them down in a particular way (i.e. no jobs, not enough money to live, high tuition fees, etc)? If particular grievances are addressed (jobs created, tuition decreased, housing ensured), will they continue to have faith in and support the system? In

other words, do they want to abolish neo-liberal capitalism (and the forms of politics and power that exist to support and perpetuate it,) or do they want greater inclusion and representation *within* it. These are questions worth asking and distinctions worth making.

Naming the System, Naming the Problem

One must stress that the OWS *does* have specific demands. These include kicking Obama out of power and reinstating *The Glass-Steagall Act* (HR 1489), immediately. [3] These demands are a very good starting point, but also reflect a reformist or at the very least remedial position. While there are a plurality of issues and grievances, it is important that we never lose sight of the reality that all of these ills are symptoms of a *common* problem or cause— which is the current global system of economic and political power, exploitation and oppression, namely, militarized global *capitalism*.

Many OWS protestors are naming capitalism explicitly. Does the movement articulate the role that the US government, and all governments, plays in bolstering and facilitating this system (be it through taxes and austerity measures at home or the use of tax dollars and human resources to fund and wage imperialist wars and occupations abroad)?

In naming particular symptoms and problems, does the movement implicate the *capitalist state* as much as the financial sector and the banks? Any system that changes in name but retains the same structure of exploitation, oppression and impoverishment ought to be problematized and resisted in its totality. This entails resistance against more than just the symbols or symptoms of societal ills, but also naming and ousting their *causes*. This means that it is equally as important to “occupy” capital hill as it is to “occupy” the financial district, since the two (the economic and political power structures) act in concert and are increasingly made up of the same cabal of business and policy elites. Indeed this has very recently begun to happen [4], with US protestors storming Congress, which is a positive sign about the direction of the movement.

With respect to the OWS movement it is my personal view that those participating in the massive numbers of street protests are performing a necessary and commendable act that is ultimately a potentially positive facilitator for much needed change.

Moreover, it is a way to open up dialogue on how to keep the momentum going, and how to channel this momentum into long-term transformation and deep systemic change. Some of the questions that arise are: can reformists and revolutionaries effectively co-exist in the same uprising? Can and/or will desires for reform evolve into a desire for revolution? Will and/or can reform eventually lead to anti-systemic revolution?

Lessons from Egypt

Inspired by the Egyptian revolution, the OWS movement(s) must be careful not to suffer the same fate as the Egyptian revolution. The populist Egyptian revolution appeared to be a success, so much so that several countries in the region followed suit. The dynamic of the ouster of Mubarak entailed a major victory and much deserved jubilation on the part of the Egyptian people. As the dust settled and the months passed, the people’s victory turned

sour, as the deep rooted control structure refused to relinquish power.

With the foreign-backed military still very much in power in Egypt, and elections being carried out in the midst of resurgent popular insurrection and military violence, Egyptians have to contend with the bitter sweet possibility that while they succeeded in ousting Mubarak, his exit may have been as much a result of foreign and military coordination (i.e. placating the populace while maintaining indirect control through Tantawi and the military). With Mubarak hiding out in a fancy resort town while the military continues to brutally “rule” the people, one might reflectively and depressingly interpret his exist as being a type of forced retirement with ongoing benefits (i.e. he is still alive, is not in jail, and is not in exile).

One of the lessons the OWS must take from Egypt is that an uprising cannot be solely a reactionary mode, and cannot consist only of street movements. Behind the uprisings on the street there must be serious and on-going analysis, planning and long-term strategizing by movement members and/or revolutionaries in order to determine what comes after the popular revolt(s). In other words, there must be serious organization and planning for both the revolution as well as the post-revolutionary scenario, for as is well known, where there is revolution there is always the risk of counter-revolution. Moreover, Street-based movements alone cannot create an entirely new system and may be vulnerable to short-term success. As James Petras explains:

“It is the nature of mass street movements to fill the squares with relative ease, but also to be dispersed when the symbols of oppression are ousted. Street-based movements lack the organization and leadership to project, let alone impose a new political or social order. Their power is found in their ability to pressure existing elites and institutions, not to replace the state and economy. Hence the surprising ease with which the US, Israeli and EU backed Egyptian military were able to seize power and protect the entire rentier state and economic structure while sustaining their ties with their imperial mentors” (i.e. US). [5]

It should be noted that the bulk of this article was formulated before the current Egyptian elections, which themselves are highly controversial and have been criticized internally and externally for being ill-timed and a potential means for maintaining the military/ systemic intransience. As a result, some of the points raised here may not fully reflect the fluid situation in Egypt.

Looking Back to Go Forward

Overall, it is not enough to oust or replace the *face* of exploitation and oppression; we must go deeper. To do this, all popular uprisings ought to be bolstered and underpinned by some level of historically grounded socio-political, economic and geo-political analysis, and must be capable of long-term planning and “leadership” (in an informal and collaborative sense of the word). While we react and rise up against the current global crisis of exploitation and impoverishment, we need to look historically at the broader picture and ask—analytically—how did we get to this current state? What historical lessons can we draw on to move beyond it? What are our goals and plans for an alternative? As Chomsky observed back in 1971,

“It is of critical importance that we know what impossible goals we’re trying to achieve, if we hope to achieve some of the possible goals. And that means that we have to be bold enough to speculate and create social theories on the basis of partial knowledge, while remaining very open to the strong possibility...that at least in some respects we’re very far off the mark.” [6]

Resistance movements and uprisings require *both* practical, concrete resistance activities on the streets and intellectual work and planning behind the scenes. Otherwise, they may risk being stuck in a reactionary mode, and opening themselves up to possible manipulation, co-optation and/or post-revolutionary dissipation and stagnation. Revolutionary analysis (which can be guided and served by tools such as Marxist capitalist critique and political economy) helps us to historically ground our grievances and locate their source and cause.

“As Marx demonstrated, theory can have enormous power...to guide the practice of movements, to provide people with the courage derived from seeing their struggles as historically meaningful, to offer a vision of a social alternative—an alternative made credible because it seems to flow out of the potentialities of the present.” [7]

Historically based analysis situates and connects current revolutionary struggles to what came before, and helps us “predict” and/or steer the likely outcome of our struggles. Without some level of historically grounded, theoretical (and perhaps even ideological) analysis and leadership, revolutionary movements may risk fighting the same battles over and over, with potential surface victories and cosmetic changes, which leave the historically entrenched system of power largely intact. Ultimately, long-term social transformation requires a broad and multi-faceted approach—which must include situated analysis and praxis in conjunction with historical and theoretical analysis—to understand the root of the problem and thus the optimal remedy. This approach can help us plan for the future—for the post-revolutionary scenario; and begin to formulate alternatives to the current system and develop plans and strategies for actually *building* these alternatives. In other words, it can lead us closer towards achieving social and systemic *transformation* rather than mere reformation of an inherently corrupt and unworkable system.

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Notes

[1] John Holloway. (2002). *Change the World without Taking Power*, p. 11.

[2] The State cannot be the vehicle of long-term change because, by its very nature, the State (regardless of whether it is capitalist or “communist” etc.) largely exists to protect (through its laws and regulations, or lack thereof) the power structure—which it is a part of—and business and policy elites. While I do not have the exact answers and blueprint for

a better world, my limited impression is that it ought to be one without a formal, hierarchical, power-based State.

[3] <http://www.larouchepac.com/node/19779>

The *Glass-Steagall Act*, passed by Congress in 1933 and dismantled in 1999 during the Clinton administration, prohibited commercial banks from collaborating with full-service brokerage firms or participating in investment banking activities.

Read more: http://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/glass_steagall_act.asp#ixzz1fdbrdCtj

[4] See
http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/take-back-the-capitol-protesters-swarm-congressional-offices/2011/12/06/gIQAUF7maO_gallery.html

<http://www.nationofchange.org/occupy-dc-protesters-hold-mock-committee-hearing-1320942499>

[5]
<http://alethonews.wordpress.com/2011/03/03/roots-of-the-arab-revolts-and-premature-celebrations/>

[6] <http://www.chomsky.info/debates/1971xxxx.htm>

[7] Flacks, R. (2004). In R.F. Levine (Ed.), *Enriching the sociological imagination: How radical sociology changed the discipline* (pp. 19-36). Boston: Brill

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