
Occupy Wall Street, SLATE & SNCC: Lessons?

by Mike Miller

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has everyone talking about equality, power and democracy. That's good. Whatever else might come of it, the formerly uninterested are now downloading charts and graphs on how the 1% are ripping everyone else off, and talking about what they're reading.

The initial organizing was done by small "a" anarchists—not the ones who dress in black and throw rocks through downtown windows, but people who engage in nonviolent direct action against the economic powers-that-be who really run the show, and organize how they do it in a highly participatory, democratic, non-hierarchical "pre-figurative" way; they intend to relate to others similarly engaged by "horizontal" mechanisms in order to avoid the formation of a cooptable and unaccountable leadership, and are highly suspicious of anything having to do with electoral politics, or with negotiations with the power structure. In general, I'm sympathetic with these sentiments, though, as in many things political, the devil is in the details, and I don't think you can simply build a parallel system and ignore incumbent power.

If this movement takes off, it has been waiting to happen. Staggering accumulation of wealth by the few, declining standard of living for large sectors of the middle class, growing unemployment and underemployment, deep accumulated debt by recent college graduates who can't find jobs so they can pay it off, prohibitive costs for future college students, foreclosures, evictions and underwater homes, insulting hidden-in-small-print bank fees...the list goes on. In minority communities, the causes are even

more shocking: widespread destruction of wealth for African-American and Latino households, Depression-and-beyond levels of youth unemployment, massive numbers of young men incarcerated, widespread hopelessness among the young...a similar list could go on.

TV stories of mass direct action in Arab Spring, southern-tier European countries, Wisconsin's action to occupy the state capitol and, perhaps, stories told at home by parents and grandparents who were part of the '60s all no doubt provided fuel for the fire waiting to be lit.

Initial reactions by various establishments contributed to OWS growth: Police harassment and brutality made people madder and more determined;

The lowest significant common denominator principle.

patronizing media confirmed their view that mass media are not to be trusted; the 180-degree flip-flop by major media like *The New York Times* confirmed for them that they were on the right track. The immense show of support that forced New York Mayor Bloomberg to back off from his threatened winter police crack-down showed that people across the country were getting enlisted in the movement, as did the more-or-less spontaneous OWS demonstrations in hundreds, if not now thousands, of cities and towns across the country.

"The action is in the reaction" Saul Alinsky noted in his *Rules for Radicals*. In my organizing experience, The Establishment is typically one step behind in its reaction: what they do to stop you only makes you grow, both because it confirms what you've been doing, and it tells you that you're making an impact. For an organization or movement that uses this principle, participants gain confidence in

leadership because things appear to be changing. It is only later that the question of cooptation must be faced. It is at that point that most movements become confused and perish, leaving perhaps substantial gains in public policy and cultural attitudes, but failing to accomplish their larger goals. I will return to this point below.

For now, the avoidance of specific policy proposals or demands seems exactly right. To the question, "What do you want?," the demonstrators responded "Justice" and presented an indictment of the evils visited upon the 99% by the economic powers-that-be. That's about what they should say at this point. They are now wrestling with whether and what more to say. It's a difficult question.

Were I at the Assembly in NYC, I would argue that they should organize assemblies of 5,000–10,000 people in dozens of metro centers across the country, addressing the question, "What do we want?" before they say much more.

(Community organizing groups around the country have assemblies with this number of participants now. That their program is positive but relatively timid is a different question for a different discussion.) The question now seems to me to be, "How do we get to the point of hundreds of thousands-to-millions of people being in motion?" And how should that movement be expressed? Something I'll also return to below.

The movement is now under tremendous pressure to say more about what it wants; current efforts to adopt program are, in part, a response to this pressure. At, or close to, the center of OWS, there are no doubt all kinds of ideological groupings who want to give direction to the movement ("an ideology"). I hope there are Obama Organizing for America (OFA) Democrats, Tea Party populists and others who are now becoming engaged because OWS sounds

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better to them than what they've been doing. I hope there's room for such new faces at, or close to, the center of this movement.

At the same time it draws diverse political tendencies toward its center, OWS is reaching out to people who may only be prepared to say, "I want my house back," "I want a decent job," "I want my voice heard," "I'm tired of being ripped off by the 1%," and similar pithy expressions of anger and justice. These are the people who have often been featured on friendly evening TV news shows. Their stories are deeply moving. These are the stories that should continue to be projected. They resonate with millions of Americans; that's why the Democrats are making friendly sounds about OWS: They have to. The Democrats are threatened by this movement because it may ignore them and pull grassroots en-

ergy and financial support away from them.

SLATE and SNCC: Lessons From the 1960s?

The early days of the UC Berkeley student movement—the late 1950s to the early 1960s—were a period in which people emerging from "the silent generation" of the McCarthy era had to deal with these questions. I was among them. I think we did pretty well, and that there are lessons to be learned from what we did. At the University of California, we formed a "campus political party" called SLATE. (It wasn't an acronym, but referred to the fact that our organizational origins were in a slate of candidates that challenged the "sandbox politics" of the incumbent fraternity/sorority-dominated student govern-

ment by raising local economic and racial justice issues in housing, service and employment, along with global concerns such as opposition to apartheid in South Africa and justice for farm workers.) We combined internal democracy, which allowed us to involve liberal "d" and "D" democrats, social democrats, democratic socialists, vanguard party socialists and communists, pacifists, anarchists, utopians and unaffiliated moderates and liberals, with a broad public appeal that was expressed in a "lowest significant common denominator" program that appealed to a majority of the student body. It was that combination that led to the threat of a SLATE student government and, in turn, led the university administration to first make SLATE an "off-campus" organization (leading to the name "student league accused of trying to

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exist”—“SLATE”), then to disenfranchise graduate students because they overwhelmingly were voting for SLATE. The administration reversed the decision to ban SLATE because of the overwhelming negative response it received. That made SLATE stronger—in the same way that Mayor Bloomberg’s backing down on a police shut-down of OWS made it stronger.

At the core of SLATE was a group of radical democrats and independent radicals who persuaded the more “ideological left” that it was better off not trying to get SLATE to adopt one or another of its particular points of view but, rather, that the left should view SLATE as an organization that was politicizing students to whom they might make an appeal with their more developed analyses and programs. That argument convinced Trotskyists, Spartacists, Communists, Schactmanites and others to support the idea of SLATE as a “broadly-based” organization.

In relation to the student body as a whole, the SLATE platform was based on the “lowest significant common denominator principle.” On matters of bread-and-butter on the campus, SLATE stood for higher wages from university employers, fair housing (the official university housing office was still accepting openly discriminatory listings), lower prices at the campus book store and similar student pocket-book matters, full free speech on campus (there were still restrictions on who could speak), and an end to compulsory ROTC. On broader matters the organization’s platform called for an end to A- and H-bomb testing, support for student dissidents in Poland, an end to the House Un-American Activities Committee, opposition to racism wherever it appeared, and similar positions. SLATE learned to spin off or support the formation of single-issue organizations that either might be too controversial for it to present to the student body as a whole, or that deserved more attention and responsiveness than could be provided by a

SLATE committee.

Soon SLATE had counterpart organizations on dozens of major public and private universities, small liberal arts colleges and two-year community colleges across the country. The northern student movement was born.

Should OWS continue with strength, it might benefit from exploring this approach to ideological diversity as well as this means to continue to reach large numbers of the American people. Internal dissension will soon be exacerbated by government-

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and/or corporate-sponsored agent provocateurs who will infiltrate the movement.

Similarly, the southern student movement, expressed in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (“Snick”), engaged initially in direct action on broadly supported demands: non-discrimination in public accommodations, hiring of blacks in downtown stores, “courtesy titles” (“Miss,” “Mrs.” and “Mister” to replace “boy” and “girl”). Subsequent voting rights demands had the same “lowest significant common denominator” character. The demand for no literacy requirements for voting stretched the consensus, but in ways that vast numbers of people supported when they understood the reasons why: You can’t deny us education for literacy, then deny us the right to vote because we’re not literate.

When the SNCC-organized and -influenced Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party actually sought recognition in the Democratic Party by presenting itself for seating at the 1964 Atlantic City national Party Convention, it began with a demand that appeared to have a “lowest significant common denominator” characteristic: “Seat us and not the racist ‘regulars’”—direct, simple and supportable by the vast majority of Americans.

But MFDP lacked the breadth and depth of support to effectively pursue the demand. President Lyndon Johnson was able to reverse commitments made by state Democratic Parties to the MFDP and, in so doing, undo Credential Committee votes the MFDP thought it had committed to its cause. SNCC, MFDP and their allies simply lacked the breadth of support to hold the Democrats to their word when the President told them to do otherwise.

Nor did LBJ negotiate with the MFDP. Instead a “compromise” (two “at large” seats) was unilaterally announced. It was negotiated, to the extent there were any negotiations at all, with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins), United Automobile Workers (UAW President Walter Reuther) and other liberals—and not organizations that represented the grassroots liberalism that was then growing across the country. MFDP rejected the two seats, but there was nothing more it could do. Instead, it returned to Mississippi and endorsed and worked for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket even as the white “regulars” supported and voted overwhelmingly for conservative Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. More than anything else, the Atlantic City experience unleashed the unraveling of SNCC. Had the MFDP challenge won, or even had there been a “split the delegation 50/50” compromise negotiated, a different story might have followed.

Further, after LBJ was re-elected President, the problem of movement depth appeared: MFDP’s base began to erode as more moderate black leaders, organizations and non-activist people began to enter politics because the presence of federal voter registrars and other protection made it safer to do so, and as patronage poured into Mississippi via organizations that were outside the SNCC/MFDP sphere of influence.

In my reading of these lessons, the problem facing OWS is not the absence of an elaborated radical ideology or the lack of specific policy pro-

posals. Rather, it is how to create a big tent under which many people can find a home—i.e., a lowest significant common denominator program; and how to develop an organizing strategy that roots the movement deeply in ever-expanding constituencies that encompass a majority of the American people. That, in turn, requires using tactics that can involve everyday Americans—shifting them from observers of history to its co-creators.

These can both be framed in core values of equality, solidarity, community, participation, justice, democracy, etc. that resonate with the majority of Americans. Program and policy can be measured against these value criteria. For example, a program that subsidizes lenders with low- to middle-income taxpayer money to put foreclosed homeowners in new homes would be unacceptable because it doesn't do anything about breaking up the power of the banks or about the inequality of the tax structure. A program that says, “make the banks pay—they got us in the mess; they should clean it up” would be acceptable.

It is in following this kind of approach that the possibility of radicalizing large numbers of the American people has its best chance. The “education” of the public will be provided initially by the reaction of the establishment to proposals that are supportable by the majority of Americans. For example, the proposal that public high schools have classes of 20 students maximum (as elite prep schools do) opens a broad discussion even though it is not now “realistic.”

(“Trickle-down” economics is another example: Before anything gets to those who most need it, bribes must be paid to those who already have the most. That is the present pattern of dominant Democratic Party policy, as expressed in the deals Obama negotiated with the medical-pharma-hospital-insurance industry to get their support for extending health care insurance to more Americans. Republicans, of course, want to give everything to those who already have the most. These facts are apparent to growing numbers of Americans. Ad-

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vocates of this approach use the skepticism people have about government to argue the case for their point of view. Until people feel, and in fact have, some control over their government, the skepticism will remain.)

SNCC/MFDP's challenge in Mississippi was to create depth of participation in the black community that (a) established an organizational framework and program resistant to the patronage and other cooptation of the national Democrats, and, at the

Shift everyday Americans from observers of history to its co-creators.

same time, (b) demonstrated that any effort to bypass it would meet massive resistance by Mississippi blacks—in the same way the racist Dixiecrats had blocked efforts to bypass them.

The same thing happened at UC during, especially, the Free Speech Movement. Administration efforts to bypass it failed; efforts to enlist the faculty against it boomeranged as the Faculty Senate endorsed FSM. But some of SLATE's campaigns had this dimension as well—a breadth of support that the Administration could not break.

Without depth of base, high levels of participation and internal democracy, and a broadly-based program, no movement or organization is able to defeat the resources that can be un-

leashed against it when power elites decide that they are not going to negotiate “in good faith” and are, on the other hand, going to co-opt or isolate their opposition.

Strategies Other Than Electoral Politics

There will be tremendous pressure for OWS to endorse Democrats and participate in the coming 2012 election. I hope they don't. I hope they don't start a third party either. The contribution they are now making is to shift the country's political dialog to a focus on equality, and the corruption of vast accumulations of wealth and income.

In SLATE, we fairly quickly learned that mass direct action had to accompany participation in student government if we were to accomplish anything. SNCC began with disruptive mass direct action in the sit-ins and freedom rides, but opened a second front when it adopted its voter registration program.

A next course of action that could begin to build a broad base of support might be a targeted boycott of one of the banks that is a bad offender in the mortgage/foreclosure crisis. Direct action like this should precede the metropolitan area assemblies I earlier referred to. Those assemblies could then adopt a platform for a new nation, conceived in liberty and justice, and dedicated to the proposition that

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all people are created equal.

There are both community banks and credit unions that are options for people to transfer their funds to. A negotiation with the targeted bank might say, "pull the rest of the banks together and we will negotiate one package with all of you." That would especially be the case if the initially targeted bank didn't negotiate until it was forced to. (Cesar Chavez did something similar with the major grape grower in Delano, forcing it to bring all the growers to the table.)

Another pre-electoral politics option is creating cooperative (worker, consumer and mixed ownership) enterprises with vastly different pay scales from those on Wall Street (the Basque region's Mondragon has a pay-scale top-to-bottom ratio of about 7:1 after taxes; they are internally democratic and seek big majorities—though not consensus—on matters facing them). This would express OWS's desire to be pre-figurative in its politics.

What Does a Significant Common Denominator Program Look Like?

OWS can develop a platform on the basis of its present "declaration" of principles (adopted in New York). For example and illustration:

(a) return foreclosed homeowners to their former or similar homes, and their former neighborhoods, with affordable re-negotiated mortgages;

(b) reduce public college and university tuition to 1960 (inflation-adjusted) fees;

(c) create private, non-profit or public sector living-wage jobs for all who are able to work;

(d) treat child-rearing as work;

(e) break-up any financial or corporate institution considered "too big to fail," including all corporations that received bailouts;

(f) pay for all new program costs with progressive (i.e., based on ability to pay) taxes and revenue sources;

(g) reverse the income-tax structure to 1950 Republican (Dwight Eisenhower) rates;

(h) extend Medicare to all Americans;

(i) slow, halt and reverse U.S. human-caused global warming activities in the next 25 years, and implement year-by-year enforceable standards for reaching this goal;

(j) eliminate all legal and employer barriers to the right of workers to freely choose union representation should they desire it;

(k) end all barriers to equal rights and opportunities based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender

orientation, age, physical ability, region, etc.;

(l, m, n,) etc. on all other matters in the OWS declaration.

Without the pressure to participate in 2012 elections, the discussion of a platform could take place after a history of successful mass boycotts, the creation of economic alternatives, and the development of a structure that encompasses principles of horizontalism, subsidiarity (decentralize authority as far as possible in an organizational or society structure), participatory democracy and broad-based participation.

These are some considerations that I hope will enter the present Occupy conversations. □

Reader Comments/Responses

Comment:

I was surprised that Manuel Pastor and Vanessa Carter seem to forget that race is socially determined and defined ("Reshaping the Social Contract: Demographic Distance and Our Fiscal Future," *P&R*, January/February 2012). Consequently, the authors cannot assume that American racial categories will be the same in 2050 as they are today. Projecting current trends, by 2050, many middle-class people now described as Asians or Latinos will be considered white.

Moreover, with about 10% of today's marriages already interracial, a large number of their children may be defining themselves as multiracials. (Remember, in the 19th century, the then-dominant whites whitened the "black Irish," and in the 20th, the originally "swarthy" Southern and Eastern European "races" who began arriving in the 1880s.) As a result, whites may still be numerically dominant in 2050. It is also possible that the majority-minority "line," should there be just one, will be divided into higher-class/Lighter-skinned people and lower-class/darker ones. Further, if Latino immigration remains low,

many present Latinos are whitened and racism remains intense, African Americans will not only be at the bottom but could be farther below the rest of the population economically and politically than today. The programs the two authors discuss aren't going to help poor African Americans and other dark-skinned people much now, and if my scenario makes sense, we need to start thinking about more drastic policies and how they can be implemented.

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Response:

We thank Professor Gans for his response to our article—and are indeed honored that it provoked his interest. We concur that race is a social construct and that it is a very real determinant in the everyday lives of all Americans. And that is exactly why any new approaches to politics, policies and programs must address the realities of racial disparity and avoid the sort of "leapfrogging" to whiteness that Gans raises.