The Anti-Movement Movement:

Why Occupy D.C. Stumbled

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Introduction

Occupy Wall St., also known as the Occupy Movement or, simply, Occupy, began as a call to action from the anti-consumerist magazine Adbusters to “occupy” Wall St. on Sept. 17, 2011. What happened next is the subject of many books — most of which extol the movement — along with newspaper articles, television news segments, and public chatter from all sides of the political spectrum. Nonetheless, it is self-evident that the movement did not achieve its major, although mostly implicit, goals: to abolish corporate-elite governance and restore democracy for the so-called “99 percent.”1 If this had been achieved, it would have been to the delight of millions of people in the United States and billions around the world, for there is no question that popular opinion was on the side of the movement — at least in the beginning.

At some point in late fall 2011 the momentum shifted, and the movement began its decline. There are many possible explanations for this — some competing and some complementary — but for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on explanations relating to internal problems in the movement, leaving examinations of police repression and media backlash for another paper. The focus will also be mostly limited to the Occupy Movement in Washington, D.C., which, while unique because it was once split into two

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separate camps, is also somewhat representative of the movement due to the number of Occupiers coming from other cities, in some cases after their home encampment was broken up by police.

The analysis will stretch from its beginning in early October 2011 (about two weeks after Occupy Wall St.) to late March 2012, when NOW D.C. was promoted as the next phase of the movement — dubbed the “American Spring” by some supporters.\(^2\) I should disclose that I was deeply involved with the movement — contributing five to ten hours of my time each week — in D.C. during this period as an outside-insider: I viewed myself as someone who believed in the movement and wanted it to succeed, but I did not camp outside or make other noteworthy sacrifices. This was somewhat intentional because of the need to maintain a level of professional distance in order to better serve as a mediator or facilitator during conflict situations. Nonetheless, this critique is not meant to disparage Occupy from without but to improve it from within, and I believe that my particular position allowed me to view it with both empathy and acumen.

**Explanation One: Rugged Individualism**

Setting aside the infamous “one cause, one objective” argument that Occupy’s external critics repeated ad nauseam, if there is one thing that is clear from the literature on nonviolent activism — whether one focuses on the spiritual elements associated with Mohandas Gandhi or the pragmatic elements associated with Gene Sharp — it is that success is predicated on masses of people uniting around particular goals. Occupy began as such, particularly in New York, but gradually became atomized. A good illustration of this was Occupy activists speaking for themselves when interviewed by the media and often saying things that were not representative of the movement.

It is conceivable that an individual acting alone can be nonviolent and have popular and important goals, but it is far less conceivable that one individual acting alone will achieve them. As noted journalist Thomas Frank mentions in his recent critique of Occupy, the same lack of respect for rules that guided Wall St. banksters in their corruption guided at least a significant part of the Occupy Movement. If the people in a movement are not moving

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together, it ceases to be a movement — or, at least, it loses any sense of
direction or clarity of purpose.

**Explanation Two: Lack of Respect for/Faith in Leadership**

Another characteristic of Occupy was its lack of distinguishable leaders
and centralization. This was strategic at first, modeled on past and concurrent
movements\(^7\), but in the case of the Occupy encampments in D.C., leadership
became synonymous with “usurper” or “elite.”\(^8\) It seemed as if one of the
implicit goals was to abolish all forms of authority. This, of course, contradicted
other goals associated with the movement — namely the government regulation
of Wall St. — and contributed to other problems, such as the holding of
everyone’s ideas on nonviolent direct action (for example) as equally legitimate
despite the real differences in the amount of training, experience, and
commitment between activists. This led to renegade actions — those not
consented to during General Assemblies\(^9\) but carried out anyway — internal

\(^7\) Gautney, Heather. "What Is Occupy Wall Street? The History of Leaderless Movements."The

\(^8\) Creighton, Scott. "Kevin Zeese: Turn the Occupy Movement into Obama’s Serve America Act –

\(^9\) For an introduction to the structure of the Occupy Movement and consensus decision–making
by one of the its intellectual founders:
enacting-the-impossible/>.
bickering, baseless accusations of co-optation or treachery, and ill-advised improvisation in many aspects of the movement.\textsuperscript{10}

**Explanation Three: Internal Divisions**

Lack of trust in leadership, in turn, led to internal divisions. While some divisions were over substantive matters such as whether to use nonviolent or violent tactics,\textsuperscript{11} many divisions were due to minor differences of opinion or grudges pre-dating Occupy.\textsuperscript{12} The divisions in D.C.’s Occupy at its peak could be classified based on careful observation as follows: anarchists vs. progressives, liberals vs. radicals, campers vs. non-campers, and local activists vs. outsiders.

The first two divisions are related and involve differences in political orientation. A large minority of Occupy identified as anarchists and viewed attempts at listing demands or fighting for reforms as cooperation with the state, which they consider inherently authoritarian, and therefore, evil.\textsuperscript{13} This put them at odds with reform-minded progressives and liberals alike. Liberals, 

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in turn, were challenged by everyone further to the left in the political spectrum within Occupy due to their support for capitalism and the Democratic Party. Some of those who camped in the “occupied” public spaces sought to bar non-campers from certain decisions and treat them as outside the movement, and a similar phenomenon occurred between local D.C. activists and those coming from elsewhere in the country to join the protests.

**Explanation Four: Internal Oppression**

Internal oppression is distinguished from internal division due to the power dynamics implicit in the word “oppression.” The Occupy encampments in D.C. were often criticized for excluding people based on race, class, and gender. Some activists even argued that the word “occupy” invoked colonialism and ought to be seriously re-examined if the movement wanted to be truly inclusive and consistent with mass liberation. Others, particularly white men, dismissed concerns of oppression while suggesting that any Occupier who raised the issue of race or gender was playing “identity politics” and selfishly dividing the movement. Women felt particularly threatened due to sexist language and outright sexual violence from men. These tensions led to


various caucuses within Occupy made up exclusively of women, people of color, or members of other disadvantaged groups as well as calls for “Occupy Justice.”

**Explanation Five: Lack of Training and Discipline**

Although the works of Gene Sharp could be found in Occupy’s libraries, the aging nonviolent theorist’s emphasis on training, preparation, and discipline (not to mention clarity of tactics and strategy) was largely not present in the D.C.-based movement. As a matter of principle, the encampments welcomed virtually everyone into the movement and allowed them to participate in any and all actions without preconditions. Even when it became clear that certain individuals were intentionally provoking the police into violence or putting the movement at risk in other ways, those individuals were seldom asked to change their behavior and were almost never barred from the movement. The presence of veteran activists with ample training in nonviolent direct action and other areas of relevance allowed for impromptu learning opportunities and occasional formal trainings but did not significantly affect the general character of the movement. The consequence of this lack of training

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was not only the use of tactics that were violent in spirit, if not action, but the failure to draw on the full potential of mass nonviolent action, which inspired the world in early 2011 by bringing down the entrenched regimes of Egypt’s Mubarak and Tunisia’s Ben Ali in a matter of weeks.

**Conclusion: Why Self-Criticism is Important**

If the Occupy Movement in D.C. and elsewhere hopes to regroup and produce the results its critics and supporters have been seeking, it will have to be willing to learn from its mistakes. Honest and fair self-criticism does not condone attacks on the movement from those who seek its destruction but represents the first step toward constructive solutions that will foster its growth and prosperity. Self-criticism does not hinder progress — it ensures it.

**Bibliography**


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White, Deborah. "Declaration and Manifesto of the Occupy Wall Street Movement."
