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## Special Issue: Occupy Movement

Editors: Dr. Kale Ewusi, University of Peace, Dr. Victoria Fontan, University of Peace, and  
Mihir Kanade, JD, University of Peace

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## **Destination: “The Conscience of Humanity”, Occupy Jewish and Beyond**

Author: Marc H Ellis  
University Professor of Jewish Studies  
Professor is History  
One Bear Place #97174  
Waco, TX 76798-7174  
Ph. 254-710-3609  
E-mail: Marc\_Ellis@baylor.edu

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## **DESTINATION: “THE CONSCIENCE OF HUMANITY”, OCCUPY JEWISH AND BEYOND**

### **1. Occupy Jewish**

Word on the street is that my eldest son, Aaron, is camping out in Occupy Tallahassee, the capital of the state of Florida.

When I went to college there in the early 1970s, Tallahassee advertised itself as the only Confederate capital never to fall in America's Civil War.

I doubt Tallahassee trumpets that on its "Come Visit Tallahassee" website.

A few months ago, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial was dedicated on the National Mall in Washington, D. C. In the 1950s, the African-American community in Tallahassee organized one of first bus boycotts in the South. This was before the Montgomery bus boycott that placed the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King on the national scene.

I doubt Tallahassee's website boasts of this either.

A feel-good city promotion is more important than a complicated history. So it goes. Yet today, as we look the other way, the crisis of humanity deepens. When think we have reached rock bottom, another subterranean level appears.

The Occupy movement seeks to address part of our apparently bottomless reality. Widening income inequalities, deepening ecological destruction and the ever-expanding militarism are only some of the issues discussed publically and in-group conversation. But since Aaron joined Occupy Tallahassee, I've wondered why the global Occupy campaign has largely been silent about history. For the most part, it has also been silent about religion and identity.

Obviously, the pressing issues of the day are economic and political. Yet if we look at religion in its social, economic and political aspects, this important part of the human journey must be addressed as well.<sup>1</sup>

For some activists, religion is passé. For others, religion plays a significant role in their individual and communal identity. Religion can connects us to each other and the ultimate. Religion can also be a false grounding. Religion unites us. Too often religion divides us.

Religious adherents are often at war with those who affirm a different religious outlook. But the same can be true of co-religionists. Co-religionists are often at war with one another as they struggle to name the essence of their shared religion. What does it mean to be Christian or Muslim? Do these religions call their adherents to humility and compassion or do they call them to expansive missionary domination?

Diverse readings of religious traditions are fascinating. From the save texts and traditions wholly different viewpoints and actions are derived. Thought the final arbiter is thought to be God, life in our world is in our hands.

Aaron's is an American, white, male of relative privilege. He is also Jewish.

As a Jew, Aaron brings something different to Occupy Tallahassee. No doubt his fellow occupiers have ethnic, national and religious backgrounds, which also bring a special flavor to Aaron and to other Jews.

Most participants of Occupy Tallahassee are of American and Christian background. But no doubt there are those with Muslim background as well.

Perhaps there are Palestinians in Occupy Tallahassee. I hope so. Coming from Occupied Palestine, they bring urgency to the questions of justice and freedom.

It may surprise you but it is likely that Aaron and his Palestinian comrades see eye to eye on many issues facing our unjust world. Including on Israel/Palestine.

You see Aaron is part of a minority movement within Jewish life - what I call Jews of Conscience.

Jews of Conscience believe that Jewish life has gone terribly wrong. This is most obvious in the way that Israel treats Palestinians and how the Jewish establishment in America enables that abuse. But more broadly, Jews of Conscience protest how the Jewish community at large has joined the empires of the world. In America and Israel, Jews are now indistinguishable from empire.<sup>2</sup>

Empire Jews are quite new in Jewish history. For the first time in more than two thousand years "Jewish" is defined almost exclusively within the confines of empire. Or rather, Jews, traditionally defined as the prey of empire, are now part of the empire that hunts others.

The changes in Jewish life over the last decades are massive. They are so large that most Jews take those changes as a given, as if Jews were always linked with empire. Instead of being powerless, Jews are often powerful. Put simply, "Jewish" has taken on an imperial and colonial flavor.

Most Jews would be alarmed at this sentiment. Jews as partners in empire? Jews as having their own empire? Tell me it isn't so.

Such talk smacks of anti-Semitism, it is said. Indeed it is difficult to separate historic myths about Jews and the real life context of contemporary Jewish life. Conspiracy theories about Jews still abound. Unfortunately, they are often used to deflect what we as Jews are about in the contemporary world. If we don't like what we see in a critically reflective mirror, then there is a choice. We can complain about the anti-Semites or we can once again choose community over empire.

To rid ourselves of our new-found imperial and colonial flavor, Jews need an Occupy Jewish movement.

Occupy Jewish is the mirror we need. By engaging the world, we can see where we are.

Without conscious intent, this is taking place in various Occupy sites around the world wherever Jews like Aaron are present. In the libraries that are sprouting up in various Occupy sites, the most sought books are by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, both Jewish dissident intellectuals. Chomsky and Zinn represent critical Jewish thought. They are critics of empire and promoters of community. For both the structure of injustice and the possibility of justice are key.<sup>3</sup>

This shouldn't surprise us. Chomsky and Zinn inherit the ancient and distinctive Jewish prophetic tradition. They speak it in language that the contemporary world can hear. You don't have to be Jewish to understand Chomsky and Zinn. But, minus their Jewishness, we can't really understand where they and their thought come from.

The Jewish prophetic tradition features voices raised and bodies present. The prophetic tradition understands that history is on the line. As it was in ancient times, so it is today.

Bonding with others of diverse backgrounds for justice is distinctive of the contemporary Jewish prophetic tradition. Many voices are raised. An interconnected and global history is on the line.

I doubt many Jews consciously understand that another struggle is being waged at Occupy sites around the world – the struggle for the heart and soul of Jewishness.

The struggle to is to keep the Jewish prophetic alive. Against all odds.

Why bring up diversity when unity is important? Here's why. If we think of social, economic and political movements in the West over the last two hundred years, there are few instances when Jews have been absent. Jews have been catalysts for justice movements - as leaders on the ground and as narrators drawing the larger picture.

Think Karl Marx, the great exemplar of social justice. Marx came from a long line of Jewish rabbis. In his lifetime, one of Marx's relatives was the Chief Rabbi of Trier, the city where Marx was raised.

Think Hannah Arendt. Arendt fled the Nazis to France and then the United States. Arendt was one of the first to address totalitarianism as an essential feature of modern life. Read her writings about Jewish matters. Though known as a secular universalist the great bulk of her writings are about the Jewish condition.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, justice movements feel the negative pressures of the Jewish establishment when global issues like Israel/Palestine, the Arab Spring, Iraq or Iran come to the fore. Having Jews of Conscience say "no" to Jewish establishment power is strategically important.

Occupy Jewish. Isn't it time for Jews to reclaim the right to narrate "Jewish" in our own way?

Non-Jewish Occupy companions can help in this endeavor by listening to the heartbeat of the prophetic, which is under assault. By standing strong for justice with their Jewish companions, Jews of Conscience are emboldened to stand with others in their communal struggles.

After all, it isn't only Jews that have to battle establishments in order to narrate their own prophetic story.

Think "Occupy Islam." "Occupy Christian." But also think "Occupy Secular." "Occupy Modern." At this point in history, all identities need a critical trajectory if the beloved community that Dr. King spoke about is to be created.

Yes - Occupy Jewish. Speak it out loud to other Jews. And to non-Jews. Name it. Then take it on the road. Let everyone hear what "Jewish" could mean once again.

Know this however. Whatever the sins of Wall Street or the Euro-zone, Occupy Jewish first and foremost demands that Israel ceases occupying Palestine.

Occupy Jewish begins with a confession. What we as Jews have done historically to Palestinians is wrong. What we as Jews are doing today to the Palestinian people is wrong.

Full-stop. No equivocation.

Only then can Occupy Jewish take flight.

## 2. Occupy God

Could Occupy Jewish become a catalyst to take the Occupy movement to a new level? Perhaps. But certainly Occupy Wall Street, cannot stop where it is.

Think, for example, of religion and its power in society, politics and economy. Think of the role religion plays in billions of lives.

Now think of the Occupy movement spreading to religion. Think of Occupy Jewish, Occupy Christian, Occupy Muslim – and beyond.

If we Occupy the self-designated monotheistic religions of the world, why stop there? Why not Occupy Hinduism? Occupy Buddhism? Occupy Indigenous Religions? Every religious outlook can be problematic. Every religious outlook has possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Those who disdain traditional religions get off too easy. In my mind we should Occupy Secular and Occupy Modern, too. Aren't these the real world religions of our time?

If ever every knee shall bow, it will be to modernity and its Gods. In fact, it has already happened. Traditional religions have become handmaidens to modernity.

People talk with their feet. In any congregation affluence is more important than the sacred texts. Of course, no religious believer would admit to such a blasphemy. But then again how do we actually live? What we live, we believe.

Imagine if the world's religions/ideologies/identities are called to task, disciplined and reoriented toward justice and peace. Imagine if they are called to task individually. Now imagine them being called to task collectively.

While imagining religions/ideologies/identities in the service of justice and compassion, imagine an Occupy movement addressing the immediate needs of peoples around the globe - the 99% - while charting a path for the long-range future of a humanity and ecology on the brink of calamity. We know that this can only be done together – our conceptual and actual life as one.

Imagine a global movement that embraces the prophetic mandate of lifting up the last and placing them first. Then imagine the last, now first, making a commitment that from now on there won't be first or last.

Imagine the creation of a prophetic community that reaches across religious, national and geographical lines but which also has a history stretching back millennia. Instead of creating a movement from scratch, we join a tradition of faith and struggle that has been tested in history.

Occupy isn't a stand-alone. Its burden isn't to be the tipping point. Occupy needs to speak truth to power. As other movements in history have. Other movements in history will speak that same truth.

Imagine a God who is the ground of our being and is represented in religion and literature and music and movements for justice.

Imagine a God who is sometimes named and is often unnamed.

Now imagine a God and a prophetic community that walks the talk, is in dialogue with each other and can even argue and remain committed to the task at hand. Imagine that the bond of humanity is so strong that even God can't separate those who search and those who serve.

The God I imagine is one that is within and around the world's religions. The God I imagine is also outside these religions.

Since the name of God is often used as a lever for unjust power, where else can a God of Justice and Compassion dwell except with those who have been victimized by the powers of this world? Often as not, the powers of this world protect themselves through a God they invent and promulgate as the real God. What better way to protect unjust power than claiming a divine mandate?<sup>6</sup>

But as in all the Occupy movements around the globe, we can't simply lay the blame on others - on how *they* abused their authority and power and created a God who is there for *them*.

What role do we play in the misuse of God?

Advocates of secularity safely distance themselves from God and point the figure toward the mass of retrograde believers. The enemy is easy to spot. As well, the secular saints, progressives of every land, NGO's of exalted status, preen themselves as if they inhabit a different planet than religious believers.

Yet the retrograde religious missionary denigrated in the social justice mirror is in the eye of the beholder. Secular progressives have their own missionary thrust. The condemned religious zealot is not as far from the progressive justice and peace advocate as either would like. Progressive justice and peace advocated bring their own "Gospel" values the people need for their own salvation.

So where ostensibly there isn't a God, there is a God. It is simply called something else. The God that isn't, is an unnamed God, worshipped in various forms, including through promulgation of systems of thought and production that are deemed atheistic but which are believed in as a secular form of salvation. "Progress" is an interconnected belief system that has its own ritual and creedal affirmations. Progress needs critical evaluation as an article of faith.

Many Progress believers think that if only the backward notions of traditional worship and religious connection were jettisoned by the global majority that the world would be a better place to live. Progress belief has its own values and assumptions.

In the ancient Jewish scriptures, there is a concept that might be of service today. It might shed light on Progress as a religion. It cuts wide path. In fact, whatever our beliefs – and our actions – become tentative and suspect.

The concept is idolatry, which the Bible defines as having to do with the worship of false Gods. In the Bible, the distinction between the real God and false Gods is a battle of the Gods. In the larger sense, idolatry is about placing one's sense of ultimate reality in the wrong place. An example of idolatry is devoting individual or collective life to achieving empire or affluence through dominating others. The powerful then ascribe empire to God, as if God wants what empire demands.<sup>7</sup>

Occupy Idolatry. But when we see idolatry in others, we have to look inside ourselves. Idols are everywhere. Idols are among the retrograde religious. They are also among the progressive "We Are the World" minions.

Think of Occupy Idolatry in relation to Occupy Wall Street. When we occupy the sight of idolaters, think of our own idolatry. We might be surprised at what we see.

When I Occupy (my own) Idolatry, I also think of God. Is the God I affirm or deny the God that I have imagined? Since I cannot make a claim of knowing God, I can only imagine different ways of thinking God.

Now let's bring God out of the shadows of the mind and Think Jerusalem, a real city that is claimed for holiness by the three monotheistic religions. Of course, we know that this real holy city has often been a place of carnage - real dead bodies abound. And today, this real holy city is again divided by violence and oppression.<sup>8</sup>

In Jerusalem, things aren't cooling down at all in our progressive modern age. Things are pretty much as they have been. Bloodshed all around. Bloodshed in the waiting.

Some believe that Jerusalem is simply another example of retrograde religions on the prowl. No doubt this is the case. But, then the occupation of Palestine is only possible through a highly integrated, thoroughly modern social, political and economic system. Israel is the engine of this particular occupation but check out the global reach that makes such an occupation possible.

If it is true that no man is an island, no occupation can be maintained in isolation. Interests and profits are the key. Where there are occupations, every corporate, military and educational entity that can be present is.

Yes, Jerusalem the extraordinary. But in Jerusalem ordinary life is difficult, if not impossible. Yes, Jerusalem the extraordinary. But in Jerusalem believers are militarized in the name of God.

Shall we Occupy Jerusalem and its holy places - the Wailing Wall, Dome of the Rock, Church of the Holy Sepulcher? Occupying the holy places, do we banish what is (un)holy about them?

When we attempt to banish the (un)holiness found within traditions, we come face to face with a conundrum. We are forced to ask if the (un)holiness we find is an add-on, a perversion of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or if there a fatal flaw in each tradition from the beginning. The issue joined is whether reform or a radical excision is needed. Would the world be better off without religion? Jerusalem?<sup>9</sup>

It might be that every religion, including the religion of secularity and modernity, has two tendencies. The first is toward community. The second is toward empire. The ongoing challenge of each generation is to bend religion, ideology and identity away from empire toward community.

Would the world be better off without God? Since if we examine the base of each tradition's claims about what God wants, demands and needs from his followers, the result is mixed. Justice and compassion abide. So does violence and empire. If we ask each tradition how it knows what God wants, demands and needs, the answer is a self-justifying - "God tells us." In our time the self-justifying claim of revelation isn't enough. Such claims need to be disciplined and limited as it relates to society and the world. Are we then limiting God?

Perhaps the argument about God, like the arguments about religion, ideology and identity, involves community and empire. As with religions/ideologies/identities, God may carry this dichotomy within himself. At least as represented in most religions, God sometimes opts for community. Other times, God chooses empire. Is it time for us to challenge God when God moves toward empire?

Occupy Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By doing so, we also Occupy God. This means we interrogate God's claims. Is the voice we hear within these traditions God's voice? Interrogating God, God at least has an independent word. We listen. We also speak our independent word.

Cross examine God. Is God a God of justice for the poor and oppressed? Or is a God on the side of the empire enablers who grind the poor in the dust? On the one hand, God may seek to conquer in the name of religion. On the other, God may want to be free of those who violate others in God's name.<sup>10</sup>

When we cross examine God, we advise God - if God is unaware - how his name has been used. The violence done in God's name by God's followers is legendary. History records the violence done by those who claim to be following God's revealed truth. Perhaps God has another truth to share with her interrogators.

If we Occupy God, we are right there, so to speak, on the Wall Street of God's projection. When we Occupy God, we give God voice and a choice. Is God with the Wall Street dressed-up religions or with the often-atheistic ramshackle protestors?

There is a God who sides with Wall Street religion. There is a God who dwells among the protestors. The choice is obvious: a God of Shrines or a God of Justice. Profit God or a God of the Prophets.

One asks: Is it we who makes the choice for God? We imagine God in our own image. Perhaps. But if this is so, it means that if we Occupy God we Occupy Our Self.

Occupy Our Self. Is this the ultimate reversal? Inversion?

Occupy Our Self. Is this the ultimate homecoming we await?

### **3. Occupy Self**

When I Occupy Jewish, I also Occupy God.

"Jewish" and "God" are deep identity/ultimate entity realities. They are also constructs.

Occupy Jewish or Occupy God or Occupy Wall Street: Are these labels that come from outside and then define us? They may be entities outside of self, which help define self. They may define us as an overlay of our "real" self. If a real self exists.

So Occupy All-That-Defines-Us. Occupy Politics, the right-wing Republican kind for sure, but even the NGO/Peace Studies/International Monetary Fund/United Nations variety.

Politics is important. It is also another projected Other. Politics is real. It is also constructed.

This means that the "real" of politics can be reconstructed. Like Jewishness and every other ethnic and religious identity. Like God and the various beliefs about God.

What we think about religion/God/politics has always been. What we think about religion/God/politics hasn't always been. What was isn't now as it was or how it will be. Everything changes.

Are there primal origins of self that go back before our arrival? Or does self begin at birth? Family, culture, religion, politics and language help define who we are. They don't define who we become.

Deconstructing religion and politics is essential - as essential as deconstructing self.

Reconstructing religion and politics is essential - as essential as reconstructing self.

The philosopher Morris Cohen was once asked by a student: "'Professor, how do I know that I exist?' To which Cohen replied, 'So? And who is asking?'"<sup>11</sup>

If we take for granted our existence, since we do exist, then the question of who we are is important. As important is the question rather where we come from, where we are now, and where we shall move toward.

I use "we" because "we" includes "I" but doesn't stop there. I cannot exist without others. Nor can others exist without me. We are bound together.

This means that the discussion of where the Occupy movement is going and what it stands for - a constant refrain in the American media - is less relevant than the "we" it represents. Occupy are individuals engaged with one another about issues and realities of our existence.

The Occupy movement may be going nowhere. Or it may be going somewhere.

The nowhere/somewhere dichotomy confuses the issue at hand. While it seems counter-intuitive to hold nowhere/somewhere together at the same time, it may be that within the supposed dichotomy of nowhere/somewhere, the counter-intuitive is the intuitive becoming real. A "real" that is imagined and being lived.

The intuitive becoming real is instructive of how to live personal and communal life. The intuitive becoming real maps a place within and beyond nowhere/somewhere.

Obviously "nowhere" means the present. If Occupy and other movements don't help us move somewhere else, then we are fated to injustice and destruction. Though nowhere is also somewhere, the somewhere we live now is not just or sustainable. Rather than a dichotomy, nowhere - the present - and somewhere - a possible future - represent possibility and hope. What has been constructed can be reconstructed.

Reconstructed, as in the question of what production, wealth, status and power should be all about. Knowing that we live in a material world, "somewhere" is a challenge. The challenge is to understand where certain kinds of materiality lead and at what cost. Who benefits from economic growth or even economic recession? As economies expand does political freedom expand with it? If we think of "somewhere" being sustainability, does more and more for all, or more likely more and more for the few, make life more livable or less?

The "real" charts Wall Street progress. Euro-zone progress. China progress. India progress. Does progress make the world better off?<sup>12</sup>

The "progress" slogan holds fast. Sacrifice many now and the future is ours for the taking. Empire's mantra is familiar.

Those of us who have been through the industrial/urban/technological/Silicon Valley revolution(s) know that future arrives in plastic, and that the destruction accelerates. Still the arrived can hardly lecture the as yet un-anointed many.

We see this in the lionizing of the late Steve Jobs or in the elevation of Facebook to iconic status. The whole world is texting, tweeting, "friending".

The week after Jobs died, the *New Yorker* featured a captivating cover. The cover depicts Jobs greeted by an angel as he awaits entry into heaven. The angel checks his listings on an iPad. We don't know whether the angel is searching for Job's name among others or calculating his actions to begin the judgment on his life.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps this is the way we will be judged - iPad at the ready, with calculations at a fraction of a second. Soon the Google algorithms will be so fast that we won't have time to assent to, let alone challenge God's verdict.

Be careful of the saints we name. We might become what we worship. Or perhaps we already have.

iPhoned. A truncated destiny. Perhaps we should Occupy I (fill in the evolving technology).

To many, Steve Jobs is more than a saint. He is like God. In commentary on Jobs life where this God lead us and who is left behind has been absent

This isn't to disparage the high-tech revolution. But, then, if the future is technology, why are Occupy movements turning up around the world? It seems that in the end, the Occupy movement has something to do with self - with I - and with community - with we - and with the question of what our lives mean individually and collectively. Our meaning cannot be summed up in i.

The Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas wrote that "we speak words that shake themselves free of their distorting context, we speak words that begin in the person who utters them, we rediscover the word that penetrates, the word that unties, the prophetic word." This may be the same question answered by Professor Cohen but now extended to the very power of our existence. We exist, therefore we have a word to say. That word might untie the injustice and violence of our iPhone world.<sup>14</sup>

But first we must free ourselves and our word from distortion. As well, we must pry ourselves and our word away from the world that distorts them. In an increasingly interconnected and monitored world, the challenge to regain the power of our word is complex. We can get caught up in a search for purity which leads to paralysis. Disdaining the search for purity, Occupy Self is an engagement with the iPhone word and our word. Which one will be our determining guide?

When we Occupy Self, we rediscover our word. Together with others who also have their word to speak, we might begin to untie that which is done in our name. And all that we do in our name. Then what is constructed for us and by us has a chance, if only for a moment, of being brought to light.

When injustice and violence is brought to light, life becomes transparent. A decision is before us. We can continue on this path or choose another way.

When we Occupy Self, we return to who we are and who we might be.

When I turn toward others, I untie myself and the Other. We untie each o/Other. In untying each o/Other, we already inhabit a future beyond where we were.

#### 4. Occupy Conscience

At the end of “Jewish” - or any religion, ideology or practice - God and self, we arrive at conscience. Or perhaps we begin with conscience, only later adding these named and unnamed realities. Like religion and God, conscience is embattled. It is always on the verge of being overwhelmed and subverted to injustice.

Conscience is our compass. When we travel off course it is conscience that rights our journey. That is why Occupy movements combine thought and action, mind and body. Only with this combination can conscience be mobilized in the world.

Occupy movements are an attempt to convert what is to what could be. Business and religion, politics and philosophy remain. They are (re)converted to their primary inspiration, to create and nourish life, to serve humanity.

Still the Occupy movement should be seen in the larger context of other movements of conscience. Thus the relevant response of the Gaza bound, break-the-blockade organizer, Ehab Lotayef, when asked by the Israeli Navy for his boat’s destination: “The conscience of humanity.” No doubt the Israeli commander was dumbfounded so he inquired again. Lotayef replied: “The betterment of mankind.”<sup>15</sup>

Empire and its representatives are like that. They know only one destination, power over others. Breaking the Gaza blockade is a challenge to the Israeli empire. That is why Lotayef was correct in his comeback. Clearly the Israeli commander had lost his conscience bearings. On his empire map, he could not locate the conscience of humanity. Nor could he locate the betterment of mankind.

The conscience of humanity is a destination. Obviously the Israeli naval commander, whose job it is to keep the Israeli control of Gaza strong, did not understand Lotayef’s initial response. The corollary – “The betterment of mankind” – made little more sense. Being an unjust occupier, the inability to understand was built in. It wasn’t about language facility. Since the Israeli naval commander’s conscience was in service to the Israeli state the very concept of an informed and practiced conscience was unavailable. Conscience has its own map and coordinates.

Conscience in service to the state is more or less the same everywhere. Even when the oppressed are liberated very soon that liberation is put to the conscience test. What once could be spoken truthfully as the duty of all in service to the oppressed is pressed into the service of status and power over others. Thus, conscience has to be always on guard. The cooptation of conscience is the first target of power.

Practicing conscience is being on the outlook for those on the margins of all political, economic and religious systems. This means that conscience has to be alert, informed and active. Clearly religion, God and self remain. However, they constantly need prodding. Just as each can be

levers of change, they can also be directed toward a self-satisfied self and communal aggrandizement. Jews know this as well as anyone. This is especially true when Jews use the suffering of the Holocaust as a lever of power over the Palestinian people.<sup>16</sup>

Jews who refuse to allow the Holocaust to enable injustice have a break through point. That point is conscience. Conscience raises the issue as to whether the Holocaust should be used as power over others or as a bridge of solidarity to all those who are suffering. No doubt this is a universal conscience point of view. A history of suffering should never be used to oppress others.

Yet conscience becomes even more poignant when an injury to a particular community is used to oppress another ostensibly for its own well being and members of the previously injured community refuse that equation. Refusal can be based on strategy – power alone will not achieve security. Still another stage is reached when the refusal is based on the conscience proposition that injury to one is injury to all.

The refusal to abuse newfound power carries risk, since in that refusal the previously injured community might become vulnerable again. In the Jewish case, courting justice for others after the Holocaust is a risk. Only conscience can bear this peril because something other than security is at stake. One's humanity and one's Jewishness is at stake. Jews of Conscience court this danger.

Perhaps this is this what Lotayef, a Canadian of Egyptian origin, was communicating to the Israeli naval commander – and by extension to the Israeli state, Jews within Israel and Jews everywhere – that conscience is a risk worth taking for the “betterment of mankind.” Of course, Lotayef was speaking to others as well, perhaps specifically to his fellow Egyptians and Canadians. He was saying out loud that the conscience of humanity plies the waters of this world and that conscience refuses to recognize borders that are occupied unjustly.

And more, Lotayef in his declaration, like Emmanuel Levinas in his understanding of the prophetic, “unties” history and the claims made upon it by those in power. It even unties those who make claims in response to suffering undergone in history, especially when sufferers claim new victims in history's name.

The heart of the prophetic is conscience, the ultimate judge of power and history. Does this mean that prophetic is informed by conscience? Or is conscience only practiced when it is informed by the prophetic?

It could be that the prophetic and conscience are one and the same. Here the question of what the Occupy movement can accomplish is transformed. Movements of conscience may not be able to convert national and global institutions toward justice and compassion. Modernity, with its established bureaucracy, advanced technology and complex social organization, may not be capable of an about face.

With the globalization of manufacturing and distribution and the industrialization of food production, as well as the dependence of nations on arms production and purchase, not to

mention the ever-increasing demand and dependence on fossil fuels, can the world slow its pace and reorient itself to create a sustainable global community? Creating a sustainable global community is only possible with the end of empire. Since history is replete with empires, it might be more productive to think of ways of creating community within empire. This is what Peter Maurin, the French peasant who co-founded the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s with Dorothy Day, meant when he spoke of creating the new society within the shell of the old.<sup>17</sup>

If the Occupy movement continues to expand or, more likely, if it diminishes over time, it will take its place in the broader history of faith and struggle. As it has been through history, the challenge is to bend empire toward community and live that community for years or days or moments as a witness to the possibility of a world beyond the one we live in today. In this broader history of faith and struggle, as in life itself, there are no final victories. Yet in performing the prophetic, in reaching out to those in need and witnessing to a world of justice and compassion, the goal of sustainable global living remains alive.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Occupy Tallahassee's general mission statement: "WHAT IS OCCUPY:TALLAHASSEE? Get corporate influence and funding out of politics, media, and education! We take action alongside the nonviolent protests which started Sept. 17th on Wall Street in Liberty Plaza and are still going strong. Let's take a stand in Tallahassee in coordination with all other world wide Occupys! We want all of our brothers and sisters who currently Occupy Wall St. to know that we stand with them in solidarity, all across the country. And for all of those who are struggling to make your friends and family take notice of what is happening, do what you must to wake up those who are in a deep sleep. We are demanding exposure and disclosure of fraud and deception, among many other things! Get involved." See Occupy Tallahassee website <http://www.occupytally.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion of Jews of Conscience and the rebirth of the prophetic in Jewish life see my *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel* (New York: New Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jess Bidgood, "Occupying Boston and Beyond, With Tent Libraries for All," *New York Times*, October 22, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> On Karl Marx, see the new biography, Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011). For Hannah Arendt, see Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> An example of needing to Occupy a religion that is often portrayed as the peaceful antidote to rigorous monotheism see a useful study of Buddhism and Japanese militarism in Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> This abuse of God and the possibility of God for justice are found in liberation theology. For a documentary history of that movement *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed., Alfred Hennelly (New York: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> For a modern interpretation of idolatry see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.)

<sup>8</sup> For a recent history of Jerusalem see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> For my understanding of Jerusalem as the broken-middle of Israel/Palestine see *O'Jerusalem: The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

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<sup>10</sup> Here Judaism may make yet another major contribution to the Occupy movement, especially in relation to the ability to argue with God. See Anson Laytnor, *Arguing With God: A Jewish Tradition* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Saul Bellow, "A Jewish Writer in America," *New York Review of Books*, LVIII(October 27, 2011): 26.

<sup>12</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the progress in the modern world see Richard Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> *New Yorker*, October 17, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Monotheism and Language," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1990), 180.

<sup>15</sup> Isabel Kershner "Israel Intercepts 2 Boats Challenging Blockade of Gaza; No Violence Reported," *New York Times*, November 5, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> For the Jewish use of the Holocaust as a lever of power see Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (New York: Verso, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> See my biography *Peter Maurin: Prophet in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

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## **Occupy--A View from the Grassroots: “Thoughts on Diversity, Intersectionality, Strategy, and Movement Building”**

Author: Paulina Gonzalez  
Executive Director  
SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy)  
152 W. 32nd St.  
Los Angeles, CA 90007  
(213) 745-9961 ext. 202  
(213) 745-9969 (fax)  
E-mail: pgonzalez@saje.net

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I’ve spent the last 20 years of my life organizing for the rights of students, hotel workers, farm workers and immigrants. Two years ago I became the Executive Director of SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy), a community-based organization working to organize a grassroots economic-justice movement in South Central Los Angeles.

As I’ve watched the Occupy Wall Street movement evolve, and as I’ve spent time at Occupy Los Angeles and visited Occupy Wall Street, at different moments I’ve found myself inspired, frustrated, lost, pained, and hopeful. Occupy has captured the imagination of progressives, it has mobilized tens of thousands of people, and organized hundreds of encampments and affiliated protest actions, but on the ground I’ve found the interactions among the 99% taking part to be much more complex.

My involvement in this burgeoning movement has been a roller coaster of a ride. As I continue to try and find my place within it, I reflect on what I’ve learned from Occupy and what I hope it has learned from those of us who have taken part in it.

As a single mother of two children, one of whom suffers from ADHD and the other who is in the middle of the college application process, I have regrettably not been able to spend as much time

at Occupy as I would have liked. As a reminder of my limitations and the challenges that others must face, the first day that I made my way to Occupy, in the 2nd week of the encampment, my 7 year old son and I didn't quite make it. He had a bit of a meltdown a block from the encampment, and we had to turn around and go home.

I tried again the following week, and unfortunately my first full experience at Occupy Los Angeles was a painful one. It was the reason I didn't return to Occupy LA for another month.

It all started at that night's General Assembly. The General Assembly is meant to be a horizontal leaderless decision making body that operates on a consensus decision making process. That means that at that time--the structure has changed somewhat since then-- a hard block by anybody in the General Assembly could prevent any proposal from being adopted.

This is the story of my experience that night.

I pushed my way to the center of the circle, at 5'1 this was the only chance I would have to see and hear and to be seen and be heard. I took a deep breath added my name to the stack and waited for my turn to speak among this group made up mostly of men. The group had formed from the Occupy LA General Assembly, it consisted of people who had blocked a proposal to endorse a civil disobedience action by dozens of hotel workers. These workers had planned a protest with their union because they had been fired by a hotel in Bel Air. This small group of Occupiers now held this proposal in the palm of their hands.

The people that the Occupiers were debating whether or not to support, were hotel workers, most of them immigrants and women, veterans of the fight against corporate power. I know this because my father, who was fired from his union job as a hotel dishwasher a couple of years ago, is also one of these veterans. The fight of these veterans of struggle is a fight for dignity and respect, but also a fight for their livelihoods, and in this fight they stand toe to toe, immigrant workers against corporations.

While waiting my turn to speak, I thought of these workers, the housekeepers with their aching backs from lifting heavy beds. I thought of the dishwashers with their aching knees and fungus in their nails from working in water all day. I thought of the women hotel workers who go home to their children with worn bodies from catering to the 1%. As I stood among this group of men, I wondered quietly to myself what these workers would think of this conversation.

At times the conversation turned into a shouting match, the loudest person often won control of the floor. The men in the circle demanded to know why these workers hadn't joined Occupy LA. "Where is their union!?!?!?!?", they asked. "When is their union going to bring 35,000 people down HERE!?!?!?!?", they shouted. I felt my anger and frustration boiling and at times I shouted too, but as impatient as I was growing I decided against battling the maleness of the group on their terms. So as others yelled, I again waited.

It was getting late, and behind us 200 people were still taking part in the General Assembly discussing other proposals that had been brought to the group. In between us and them another small group had broken off from our discussion and formed around a young man who carried a

sign denouncing non violent tactics. I turned my attention back to the group and listened as a Latino man spoke, he told us that he is a union member and that he was here despite the fact that he had a young daughter waiting for him at home. I felt a connection to him, after all, I'm a single mother and I have two children at home.

When it was my turn to speak I stepped into the center of the circle and I spoke from where my spirit comes. "I speak to you today as the daughter of a hotel dishwasher, who walked the picket line with her father in his fight for dignity and respect on the job, for his right to be treated as a human instead of a dog." What would my father think about this discussion? Although he can understand some English and could hear and understand the comments being made about people like him, he would need to ask for a translator to be understood by everybody else. I imagine that he would leave frustrated and angry.

Last night, my point to that group was this: What would it mean to this movement of the 99% if women housekeepers were to march up here to join us? How powerful would that be? But the question is not why are they not here, the question is what would it require to make this space more diverse and broad? What would it require from us? What would it mean if we joined them that day, in bel air the heart of the 1% , and marched with them in their struggle against corporate America. What would it mean if we made it clear to them that this is also their space and that we are fighting for them, because they are the 99%.

There is a reason why immigrant workers were not flocking to the encampment, and it had nothing to do with whether or not they believe in the fight. As I spoke, dozens of hands waved their fingers in the air signaling agreement. I stopped speaking after I felt that I had taken up too much space. Two minutes later what I had said was forgotten among the discussions about process and another rant from the man who blocked the proposal. A short while later I left because after 8 hours of Occupy LA I had to get home and help my daughter with her essay that was due Monday morning. The man with the daughter, whom I had felt the connection with earlier, he was gone too.

As I went home after this experience, and as I thought about the potential that this movement holds, I realized that it is not held by me or anybody else occupying city hall, or Wall St., or any other city around the country. It is held by the 99%, and the 99% is much bigger than all the aforementioned people. The 99% includes the hotel housekeeper, it includes my father, it includes my neighbor in working class Montebello, it includes working class white Americans who may not yet believe in protest but do believe that they should be heard much more than any corporation, it includes my son's 2nd grade teacher, it includes my 17 year old daughter who hopes to go to college, it includes the people I work with on a daily basis who struggle to put food on their table and whose community was in an economic crisis long before the rest of America. The movement of the 99% also includes all the struggles that my father, the hotel housekeeper, and the resident of South Central LA are embroiled in.

This movement is not contained by Wall St, or Main St., or City Hall, or Portland, or Las Vegas, or any other physical space. If we try to contain it, we will kill it. We must grow it, we must link arms, we must lift all these struggles up, we must come up with new ideas and new forms of

resistance and organize for them. If we do, we will take this momentum, this moment, this movement and we will win.

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That was my experience that night, and over the next day I wrote the above with a level of hurt and pain that is difficult to explain. It was personal, not just political. It was personal because the space that had captured my imagination and that I had hoped would be open to him was not at that moment. It was personal because I wanted to make sure that the 99% that was often invisible wouldn't be again relegated to the shadows of invisibility within this movement. At least for that night, I was disappointed.

A few days later, I returned to the encampment because I heard that the hotel housekeepers were going to be there that night, that they were going to be there to personally ask Occupy Los Angeles to endorse their protest action planned for that Friday afternoon.

When I arrived, after tucking in my son into bed, four hotel workers, had just finished addressing the crowd. You could feel the tension in the air, after addressing the General Assembly, the women housekeepers stood to the side, watching as one by one those who continued to block their proposal spoke. I would guess that 99% of those there that night supported the hotel workers, but at least for the time being the process gave most of the power to the 1% who didn't. Ironic, isn't it?

Two white men were in staunch opposition, one argued that we should refer to these women as people and not workers, another argued that he would support the workers but not the union that represented them. Mind you, these hotel workers were fighting tooth and nail to keep their union jobs that provided free health care, a modest pension, living wages, and respect on the job. Never mind, that these workers were asking Occupy Los Angeles to endorse their protest in order to protect their union jobs. That night, the argument being made was that Occupy should not support their union.

One man, white and about 5'6, gestured angrily at the crowd from the middle of the circle, jumping up and down with an angry face and yelling at the top of his lungs that he did not and would not support the proposal. He then planted himself in front of the women housekeepers, who could not have been taller than 5'2, and refused to move when asked. I turned to the women housekeepers and asked they if they wanted to address the crowd again, they looked at me surprised and declined. One of them turned to me, after watching this heated and hateful argument take place and said, in Spanish, "They will never accomplish anything like this."

The proposal eventually passed that night. A few days later, in a powerful show of solidarity Occupy Los Angeles joined housekeepers in their protest at the Bel Air Hotel.

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As the movement grew, I made my way to Occupy actions planned at the Bank of America. There I met firefighters, teachers, garment workers, families from South Los Angeles, and others brought together through unions and community groups. As I joined in with the chants, and as

they erected tents inside the Bank of America headquarters, my hope surged again and I decided to again make my way back to Occupy Los Angeles.

As the threat of shrinking support and talk of eviction by the City of Los Angeles grew louder, I wrote this piece, originally published in Narco News:

Like many others, I've been drawn to Occupy Los Angeles, and I've visited the encampment on several occasions. I've looked for ways to involve the community leaders SAJE works with and help this moment grow into a lasting and successful movement. But as I look to the future, I find myself asking: Where to from here, Occupiers?

The City of Los Angeles has offered you "incentives" to vacate City Hall. They've offered you 10,000 square feet of office space, a farm to grow food, and 100 beds for the homeless. They say you'll be forcibly evicted on Monday if you don't accept the offer.

I attended the General Assembly yesterday, and it was clear that it would be impossible to obtain consensus to accept the proposal. This is of little concern, since I don't think the city's offer is worth taking in exchange for leaving the camp. But I am troubled by the inability to reach consensus on a strategic way forward that would grow popular support for the movement, create momentum, and potentially leverage a substantial victory for the 99%.

At last night's General Assembly, like in most of the Occupy General Assemblies I've attended, there were inspired moments of strategic thinking. But ideas quickly got lost in the clutter of the chant, "Whose lawn? Our lawn!"

Strategic decision-making and planning require analysis – an understanding of leverage and the dynamics of power. So let's take a moment to process the offer on the table and what it means. The city's offer is a positive sign. It means that Occupy has been able to amass enough public support and pressure that it has gained concessions. Some of this is due to the tactic of occupation and successful protest, and some of it has to do with powerful allies. Just last week, the powerful Los Angeles County Federation of Labor issued a statement calling on the city to allow the encampment to move to the Bank of America Plaza. Labor leaders, workers and community groups staged an action and subjected themselves to peaceful arrest in an attempt to move the encampment. This was impressive, to say the least.

Now imagine if Occupy formulated a demand that could leverage its power to not only protect thousands of Los Angeles residents from unjust evictions, but also force the city to take a concrete stance against the banks. What if Occupy locked arms with community groups and announced its refusal to move unless the city extends and agrees to enforce the moratorium (set to expire at year's end) on the eviction of tenants in bank-controlled foreclosed properties? Hundreds of Los Angeles residents, most of them low-income people of color – as well as the community organizations that represent them – would stand with you.

Imagine the power of this demand, not only for those who stand to benefit from such a moratorium, but for the strength and expansion of the Occupy movement. Let's play out the scenario: If the city doesn't grant your demand, it (a) is forced to evict Occupy, (b) looks

unreasonable and unfair, and © will have publicly sided with banks instead of the 99%. If it grants your demand, you will have just leveraged a victory that protected thousands of families from being thrown out on the street – and joined forces with organized community groups working in low-income communities of color.

With a well crafted strategic organizing moment, Occupy will have laid the foundation for a post-encampment organizing and movement-building campaign. And it will have done so in a way that emphasizes a fundamental goal of the movement: Shielding the 99% from predatory corporate interests, especially banks.

But such a plan requires the ability to make strategic decisions quickly. After attending several General Assemblies, I've reached the sad conclusion that this ability doesn't exist under the current structure. It's all the more disappointing because this moment presents a valuable movement-building opportunity.

How can a better decision-making structure help achieve more concrete results? Here's one example: A few weeks ago, a group of elderly African-American tenants came to SAJE for help because they had been living without electricity, heat, or water for over a month in one of South Los Angeles' many slums. Their building was infested with vermin; they had suffered rat bites, bed-bug bites, and the indignity of living without running water. Now they were in danger of being homeless.

Despite their seemingly hopeless situation, the tenants of this building organized. Together they confronted the slumlord who owned their building, applying pressure on him and on the city; they demanded and ultimately won relocation assistance. Due to their organizing efforts they will now have enough money to find new places to live, homes without rats and with running water and electricity. They won the basic right of a healthy, secure residence – a right many of us take for granted, and one withheld from thousands of Los Angeles' poorest and most vulnerable residents.

Spurred by their victory, these tenants have now joined forces with other residents of South Los Angeles, mostly immigrant families, who are organizing in support of the thousands who are losing their rented homes to foreclosure. These are the bottom 10% of the 99%, people living in poverty – and they're the first to suffer the consequences of so-called "austerity measures." Yet you would be hard-pressed to find them at the Occupy Wall Street encampments, and if they attend an action it is because community groups have mobilized them to support.

Why is this? Last night I sat down to talk with South L.A. community residents to ask them about their opinion of the Occupy movement. Their eyes lit up – after all, these are veterans of the struggle for economic justice, and I could tell that they had been thinking about this by their eagerness to respond.

One of the women turned to me and asked, "What is their goal?" I answered that Occupy was hoping to address the growing economic inequality in our country. She looked at me and said, "Yes, but what is their *goal*?" She said that Occupy would be better off with a concrete objective like overturning California's Proposition 13. Another community leader said that it seemed there

weren't many Latinos involved in the movement. I asked her why she thought this was and she said that she didn't think that people had enough information about what Occupy was trying to do or how to get involved.

These women understand power and organizing but are unclear what goals Occupy hopes to advance. Although they understand its basic message and generally agree with it, they do not yet see Occupy reflecting their values or including people like them. As was the case with the civil-rights movement, Americans need to see themselves reflected in Occupy – to see it embodying their values and ideals. When it accomplishes this, the movement will win broad public support and ultimately succeed.

Progressives and activists might disagree with me; after all, the movement is young, and Occupy has already captured the nation's attention and inspired hundreds to risk arrest in nonviolent civil disobedience. It's also fired up progressives across the country, who have dared to hope again and continue to voice outrage at the police repression leveled at Occupy encampments.

But this is not enough to win, and polls show that Occupy's popular support is at or below Tea Party levels. If we are honest with ourselves, we would admit that Tea Party status is not what any of us would have chosen to strive for. Remember when we mocked and laughed at them, with their silly misspelled signs, jumbled messages, and illogical demands? We do not want to be like them, do we? We want to be smarter, and truly challenge the system that promotes income inequality and allows corporate power to threaten our democracy.

If we're serious about winning, we must build a movement that can garner broad popular support – one that's nimble, strategic, and smart. Revolutions aren't won in a day, and the successful ones employ plans of action that build upon smaller but significant victories. We're not there yet in this new burgeoning movement called Occupy Wall Street. And if we don't focus our direction and energy, we may never get there at all.

As we endlessly engage in shouting matches at the General Assembly and postpone – or even reject – strategic decision-making, we fail to focus our energy where it's needed most. Meanwhile, the least advantaged of the 99% keep struggling to survive the everyday violence of poverty. Another family is forcibly evicted from its home, another worker loses his job, and another student drops out of college because she can't afford the tuition hikes. And as state legislatures across the country and Congress push through their "austerity measures", the 1% continues to protect and expand its immense wealth and power.

So where do we go from here? It's time to occupy a strategy, and occupy organizing and movement-building. A golden opportunity has been laid at your feet. You should take it.

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Occupy Los Angeles didn't take that opportunity. A few nights later, I stood with hundreds of others as we watched hundreds of tents torn down by 1,400 police officers. The violence of it all was disturbing and left an ineffable mark on my heart and mind. It was police violence not in the traditional rubber bullet, baton swinging, tear gas violence that the LAPD is capable of unleashing, but it was emotional violence as hundreds of police in riot gear descended on the

park without warning, pouring out of City Hall and from all four directions into the park. It was psychological violence carried out by tearing down of an encampment that had been lovingly built.

As for the four elderly tenants I spoke of in this article, they have been subjected to police violence as well. They were served with notice that their relocation assistance might be withdrawn since the owner of the building has sued the City of Los Angeles in order to prevent the City from making the payments.. These four elderly tenants were notified of the lawsuit when the owner of their building changed the locks and served them with a notice accompanied by 5 police cars and police helicopters that flew overhead. As police cars circled their home, these tenants were told that they would no longer have access to the building, and if not for the swift action of community organizations they would have been left homeless that day.

As tents were torn down at Occupy Los Angeles, emotions ran high, protesters were angry, some of them crying as they watched what had been their home for two months torn down. The police pushed protesters without warning or reason, the crowd surged with anger each time, and peacekeepers and others who were determined to honor the pledge of non violence that the General Assembly had voted on, took a collective deep breath and then settled down again in impassioned and disciplined protest.

Now as the tents have come down, as the four elderly tenants and their neighbors plan a protest action to defend their right to housing, as Occupy works with community groups on the occupation of foreclosed properties, as Occupy the Hood plans occupations in communities of color, as movement builders plan for the next phase, we are all taking a collective breath in preparation for the next surge.

There is something in the air, something many of us have been working towards for years if not decades, it is an opportunity like no other, and we can't afford to lose.

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## **Resist like a plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements**

Author: Michael Marder  
Ikerbasque Professor of Philosophy,  
The University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz  
Facultad de Letras/Letren Fakultatea  
Paseo de la Universidad 5, 01006 Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain  
Email: michael.marder@gmail.com

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## **RESIST LIKE A PLANT! ON THE VEGETABLE LIFE OF POLITICAL MOVEMENTS**

### **Abstract**

This brief article is an initial attempt at conceptualizing the idea of political movement not on the basis of the traditional animal model but, rather, following the lessons drawn from vegetal life. I argue that the spatial politics of the Occupy movement largely conforms to the unique ontology of plants and point toward the possibility of a plant-human republic emerging from it.

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According to an old dialectical adage, it is futile to try to comprehend the present as present; once understanding has grasped what is going on, its object gets immediately relegated to the re-presented past, affording us but a glimpse, as it were, through a rear-view mirror of history. I must thus confess, in these initial lines, to a temptation (which is, no doubt, conservative and Hegelian) to withhold for the time being a philosophical commentary of events that are not only recent and fresh but are still under way, to suspend judgment of a political movement or movements still breathing with infinite possibilities, still lacking as much as a commonly agreed upon name, let alone a coherent program. While any interpretation must veer on the side of

determinacy and delimitation, discarding countless plausible alternatives to its preferred take on whatever is interpreted, the side effects of such unavoidable hermeneutical violence are much more pernicious when it runs the risk of interfering with the internal unfolding of an ongoing, hugely promising, and exponentially growing political action. But is it even assured, at this point, that what is going on under the most diverse names—the Occupy protests, or the 99% movement; the movements of the *indignados* (the outraged) or the *acampadas* (camp-city) protests in Spain; *Geração à Rasca* (the Desperate Generation) movement in Portugal, to mention but a few examples I am familiar with first-hand—is both *political* and an *action*? And, more broadly, what if the very meaning and possibility of politics and collective action are at stake in these and related collective phenomena today?

This—at least, in my view—is the only sound counter-argument to the conservative desire rather not to interpret actuality: instead of merely understanding events as objects and, hence, relegating them to the past, it behooves philosophers to assist those directly involved in them to achieve a more vibrant self-understanding, a self-interpretation enhancing the possibility of a more just future. Through this route, philosophy will finally abandon the gloom-filled historical dusk when the owl of Minerva spreads its wings, without, at the same time, imposing decontextualized and purportedly ahistorical normative constraints on whoever cares to listen to philosophical ramblings. All we can attempt to do is amplify, bring into sharper relief, and sometimes problematize the meanings of what is already stated or done by the social actors themselves, that is to say, assist them in the critical project of self-interpretation. Philosophy, then, to borrow the expression of the Portuguese seventeenth-century Jesuit preacher António Vieira, as a “history of the future.”

At the same time, the popular protests of 2011 are also a part of the recent political history, including the civil disobedience and civil rights movements of the 1960s. The occupations of various public and institutional spaces today have an air of embodied citations or enacted references back to that promising political moment, for which many feel an intense nostalgia. Now, like then, the rhetoric of non-violence is prevalent. Camping in public parks and on city squares can hardly evoke images of rioting or looting; sitting on the ground in a human chain with interlocked limbs surely does not convey the intention to engage in a physical confrontation with the police. What is most subversive about the recent protests, though, is not political action conventionally understood but a kind of lingering, being in a place on an ongoing basis, bodily occupying it, being physically there. Existence in its mere presence undergoes a thorough politicization. Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly merge into one: physical presence (or, rather, co-presence) expresses, without representing anything, in the most embodied sense of expression imaginable, the demand for a different world-order.

By and large, the politics of the Occupy movement is the politics of space, not of time, and it extends its reach by replicating itself in different locales around the world, not by formalizing its program in an effort to attain a stable temporal identity. While it continues to resort to the traditional tactics of marches, support for labor unions on picket lines, and demonstrations, the core of the Occupy movement is made of the determination to dwell in the uninhabitable, to inhabit a previously depersonalized, depopulated, abandoned, but highly symbolic and central place in the public sphere. Its staying power is bound to the protesters’ staying in their chosen gathering place, their defiant perseverance in a locale.<sup>1</sup>

The politics of space, privileging the sedentary component of bodies largely exposed to the elements (tents are a poor protection from rain and cold) and gaining increasing visibility thanks to this exposure, is, I would argue, one we have learned from vegetal life. Standing for non-violence *par excellence*, the plant has been identified in the history of Western thought with a living icon of peace, a non-oppositional being, wholly included in the place wherein it grows, to the point of merging with the milieu. As Hegel notes in his *Philosophy of Nature*, unlike an animal, who opposes itself to its place, insofar as it is able to dislocate and to find itself elsewhere, the plant is shackled to its environment, which is not at all “other” to it. The plant is all about a visible extension without interiority (Hegel 2004: 308), a phenomenal, utterly exposed, self-referential surface, a living sign of itself. When environmental activists chain themselves to trees that are about to be felled, they replicate, to some extent, the mode of being of these vegetal beings: confined to a place, bodily manifesting their bond... And when protesters pitch tents in parks or on city squares, they reinvent the strange modern rootedness in the uprooted world of the metropolis, existentially signifying their discontent by merely being there.

A common-sense objection to this thesis will accentuate the unsurpassable limits to the mimetic capacity of human beings, the capacity arguably definitive of their very humanness. After all, dissimilar to plants, we are able to choose our place and, subsequently, to dwell by making the place our own, which is something the Occupy protesters have done in a self-conscious and highly creative fashion. The plant’s relation to its milieu is, precisely, non-appropriative; it does not possess its world, even though it may indirectly effect certain changes in its environment. Humans cannot literally become plants. Purely vegetal beings do not protest, do not set themselves against anything, do not negate—symbolically or otherwise—what is. But if we act *as though* we were them, following a useful theoretical and practical fiction grounded in the vegetal heritage of the human, we would need to follow a non-possessive, non-appropriative way of being, resonating, at once, with the conclusions of botany and with the image of post-metaphysical ethical subjectivity. We would, consequently, repudiate the ideal of sovereign and decisive action, directed by a rational, conscious or self-conscious, individual or collective subject and, instead, nurture the horizontally and an-archically growing grassroots that crop up wherever protest tents are pitched in the shadow of skyscrapers.

Levinas’s “passivity more passive than all passivity” (1996: 121) is a distant echo of what Hegel calls the “powerlessness,” *Ohnmacht*, of plants (1979: 420) that in their being are propelled to the hither side of ontology and its basic economy of violence, where to be is already to dispossess others, to take away their place. The *flower power* of the sixties thrived on a juxtaposition of peaceful protests and armed police—flowers on (or in) the one hand and guns on (or in) the other. The “power” of non-violence was meant to overwhelm the brute military force of repression, not the least by modeling the protesters’ mode of being on that of the plants themselves.<sup>2</sup> And yet, the cutting of the flower, the disruption of its organic connection to the soil, was not considered to be violent, perhaps because it paled in comparison to the violence of the war, against which proponents of *flower power* rallied, and that of the riot police who confronted them. Impotent to resist its culling, the flower could be easily sacrificed to the political cause, so as to be reborn in the realm of Spirit, endowing those who utilized it as a symbol with its peculiar brand of powerless power. Residual violence against non-human beings was ineliminable.

A similar paradox is unfolding before our eyes today. Occupation, as a rhetorical trope and a concrete strategy, already connotes a significant degree of violence, which is either ontological or purely political, either built into existence itself imperialistically asserting its own right to a place, which is then denied to the other, or borrowed from the very phenomena the protesters find so objectionable: military occupations, colonial projects, and so forth. For Levinas, who implicitly follows Nietzsche's idea that plants are the vegetal expressions of the will-to-power, ontological violence is inseparable from their growth, asserting, most unethically and indifferently, their "place under the sun." As the French philosopher asks in *Difficult Freedom*, "What is an individual, a solitary individual, if not a tree that grows without regard for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun, a being that is fully justified in its nature and its being? What is an individual if not a usurper?" (1997: 100) But is the "usurpation" of resources by a tree equivalent, in its magnitude, to their appropriation by the avatars of possessive individuality? The tree actually gives back much more than it takes, in that it converts carbon dioxide into oxygen, not to mention the fact that it does not lay claim to the non-resource infinitely available to all, namely the sunlight on which it depends. In much the same fashion, the occupations of public spaces by protesters are not of one piece with the arrogation of wealth and resources by the richest one percent of the population. Plants do not occupy anything even if they cover vast extensions of the planet's surface; the generous compensation for their ontological violence (if any) is the gift of pure air, of a more fertile soil, of life itself they bestow upon other creatures. Participants in the Occupy movement also do not occupy anything; their being in a given locale is intended to reconstitute the possibility of dwelling to others, while the tents unequivocally bespeak their displacement, an irrefutable refugee status.

Analogous to plants, the protesters' being-in-a-place is far from what Levinas would call "the imperialism of the same," for it is tantamount to the irruption of otherness from the fissured, if not altogether broken, hegemony of neoliberalism. Regardless of the numerical majority of vegetal beings among those living on the planet and regardless of the protesters' performative self-identification with "the 99%" who get more impoverished by the day, both represent instances of the subaltern, exploited without raising their voice against their oppression. Admittedly, plants neither speak, nor shriek, nor squeal, nor screech, nor cry out in pain when they are chopped down. But this absolute silence is not at all symptomatic of the absence of suffering; even if vegetal beings do not have a nervous system, they are prone to distress, expressed at the biochemical level, due to drought, extreme cold, or, in some cases, the presence of a predator in their environment. Subjected to violence in absolute, unbreakable silence, they are absolutely subaltern, and neither human nor animal liberation can come to pass without the liberation of plants that would dispense to them their ownmost ontological possibilities.

Human beings, on the contrary, are capable of organizing, speaking out against, and protesting economic and political injustices. But when they resist on the basis of radical passivity (an attitude in excess of the opposition between the active and the passive components), when they are so motivated that every expression of their life, such as the physical position of their bodies and the place they inhabit, attains a political character, they do not limit "politics" and "action" to a conscious collective orientation and sovereign decision-making. This is not to say that the protests are somehow irrational. Quite the opposite is the case: they are much more reasonable

than the purported rationality of the deranged political-economic system they resist, even as they implicitly question the hierarchy of the faculties and the anthropocentric view of politics as such.

The modern idea of a political *movement* has already glimpsed the kind of dynamic action that overflows the rigid confines of a conscious organization, but it has done so with reference to animal metaphors, reducing movement to mobility, or locomotion. Inspired by the organismic model of an animal, it has, in crucial moments of the twentieth century, lapsed into fascism, with its goal to recreate this living totality at the political level. And it has all but forgotten the lessons of Aristotelian philosophy, where movement refers not only to locomotion but also to growth, decay, and change of state (*De Anima* 406a, 14-17). Plants obviously partake of these capacities and it is high time for political movements to become attuned to a more ample definition of “movement,” to learn from plants much more than the rhetoric of the “grassroots” would allow, to discover what it takes to grow, to decay, and to be plastic enough to metamorphose into a different state. And this is not even to mention externally induced movement, by an element such as the wind disturbing branches of the tree or stalks of rye, the movement most readily associated with plants. The zoo-centric bias of philosophy must give way to a wholly de-centered phytological approach, for a human being is, in the first instance, not a political animal, as Aristotle has it, but a political plant, not ζῷον πολιτικόν but φυτὸν πολιτικόν.

The non-violent resistance tactics of the Occupy movement are a step in the right direction, if the movement’s rigorously an-archic, highly mobile, and, at the same time, sedentary structure is a trustworthy indication. It resonates with Ulrich Beck’s recent enunciation of his ideal of European citizens in mixed vegetal-animal terms: at once having roots and wings.<sup>3</sup> From the standpoint of the political authorities, however, there is no such thing as a non-violent protest because any sustained contestation of the status quo immediately takes the form of a threat to the hegemonic order, already weakened by the ongoing global crisis. In this respect, it is essential to follow the finer divisions within the general economy of violence, to distinguish between acts of institutionalized theft, such as the bailouts of financial institutions that have left countless people destitute thanks to the draconian austerity measures compensating for these expenditures, close range pepper spraying of protesters, and ontological violence coextensive with mere being. Politics necessarily entails pitting violence against violence, especially where the standoff is asymmetrical and, perhaps, foredoomed. When the legitimacy of a regime is put in question by the sheer bodily presence of the protesters who claim the right to occupy the regime’s most emblematic places, existential-ontological violence without power, or at least, without reliance on physical force, opposes itself to the violence inherent in the self-perpetuation of unjust institutions. A “peaceful protest” is nothing but an oxymoron, as the cut flowers, too, silently testify.

Despite their philosophical and poetic coding as figures of pure innocence and non-oppositionality, plants often protect themselves by releasing toxic or venomous substances, by prickling, or by other means. Still, their “self-defense” is unique, because they have no intimate inner self to defend, at least no self that would emerge in opposition to the other. To resist like a plant is not to protest for the sake of a ground to be gained; the program of a limited re-distribution of wealth from the richest one percent to the rest (a minor adjustment, to which many billionaires have, actually, consented by signing petitions for an increased taxation of their incomes) is pointless if it leaves the principle of appropriation intact. Just as the protests flourish

from the sense of radical dispossession prompting its participants to leave their homes, those embodiments of interiority and privacy, so the aspirations of the movement would come to fruition only in the total negation of private property and of the possessive model of subjectivity associated with it. Communism, inconceivable in the absence of this radical demand, is vegetal in its rejection of the appropriative model of subjectivity, whose basic unit is an individual separated from all others and constituted around a coherent core—the dimension of inner psychic depth and the capacity to own property essential to personhood.

What would it mean to occupy public space without appropriating it? To manifest a multiplicity of bodies in a locale without asserting a sovereign right over it? Would it not imply being in a place without laying claim to it, being there for others?

In response to these questions, let us attempt to sketch the outlines of the correlation between various types of movement typical of vegetal beings and the emergent political movements. I have already mentioned the an-archic component of the Occupy movement, which seems to reinvent the political form on the basis of vegetal ontology. As I argue in *Plant-Thinking*,<sup>4</sup> each plant in its singularity is a collective being, a loose and disorganized assemblage, and, hence, a community of plants that do not comprise a unified whole, do not constitute either an individual or an organism. In vegetal beings, life is de-centered—not, as some might think, concentrated in the vital “organ,” the root, but dispersed and disseminated throughout the body of plant communities. The same applies to the recent protests devoid of a unified central structure, a leader, or a global organization. The new political movements are vegetal, considering that they are acephalic, headless, and, therefore, obdurately an-archic, lacking an *arkhē*, an organizing principle or origin. They grow by “superfluous” additions or reiterations from this enabling lack. Growth as such is always dispersed, from the beginning it does not have; to move in tune with it, following its peculiar rhythms is to accept this dispersion.

The new protest movements proliferate in much the same fashion, by vegetal iteration, not by reproducing an ideal standard in multiple empirical copies. It is, in fact, difficult to say what the “original,” incipient moment for the Occupy movement has been: Occupy Wall Street, or the Spanish *acampadas*? The events of Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Ukrainian *Maidan* encampments, or the student occupations of American university campuses in the 1960s? The displacement of the origin, its dissemination and decimation, is in touch with the logic of plant life, where the seed is not the first cause but an infinitely deferred point of recommencement, the chance of a new beginning.

It is this absence of an essential and essentially simple origin that frees today’s political movements for experiments in self-reinvention, whence the most unlikely strategic alliances emerge. More importantly, what they seem to have learned from plants is how to move by metamorphosis, or change of state. Unlike animal *Gestalt*, vegetal form is not pre-given in the embryonic state; it shifts and changes, sometimes dramatically, as the growing plant extends its surface, capturing solar energy. Now, the form of the protest movement, too, is far from being predetermined by the movement’s beginnings—themselves obscure and irreducible to a single point in space and time—as its growth often branches off in surprising directions. In capturing political energy, it avoids the animal-like hoarding of its power in the recesses of the organism and, instead, channels this energy toward solutions of the most urgent social problems, such as

homelessness. (The occupations of vacant buildings in Seattle, Boston, and Atlanta are the case in point here.) There is no telling where such immediate externalization would lead in the long or, even, in the short run. One thing is certain, however: no movement can hope to maintain its vitality, after having abdicated the power of metamorphosis, for instance, by turning itself into a political party. In itself, this transformation spells out an extreme possibility of metamorphosis: a change that puts an end to any further changes of state. If it is to preserve itself *qua* movement, the loose network of the Occupy protests must not keep itself intact, must fight against the temptation to remain in its current form, rendered perfectible in the animal manner by inner differentiation and specialization of functions within an organismic totality. On the contrary, and perhaps paradoxically, in order to keep itself, a movement must lose itself and re-compose itself each time anew, in a completely different, unrecognizable form. The term for this meta-metamorphosis is “plasticity.”

Plasticity, arguably much more pronounced in plants than in animals (cf. Hallé 2002), involves, at the political level, the capacity for adaptation that has the potential to withstand the most repressive police actions, evictions, and uprootings: to be, at the same time, pliable and rigid, like an ivy disturbed by gusts of wind: to know how to hold one’s ground without miming the immobility of a rock. The silent seated student protest, to which the Chancellor of the University of California, Davis was treated on her “walk of shame,” was a plastic, vegetal reinvention (better yet, a reiteration) of the movement broken up by the campus police a few days earlier. It stood for the exact inversion of the experience *Émile* Cioran described in *De l’Inconvénient d’Être Né*: “To walk in a forest between two rows of ferns transformed by the autumn, that is triumph. What is that next to approbation and ovation?” (211) And it facilitated the uprooted group’s self-reconfiguration, much like a stem cutting that, planted in soil, recovers the cellular differentiation at both extremes, shooting new roots and buds. Hence, the slogan, following the logic of plant life that regenerates thanks to pruning: “Occupy will never die; Evict us, we multiply!”

The subtle vegetal movement of decay holds yet another promise for contemporary political practices. It is no secret that the same plant can wither and flourish at the same time, die in parts and continue to live in other parts, so that life and death literally get dispersed on its body. It can accomplish this feat thanks to the fact that it is not an organism, obeying the logic of an internally differentiated living whole, but a loose assemblage of quasi-independent members. An an-archic political movement repeats the achievement of the plant, in that it, too, may have parts that decay while others thrive, rendering the absolute terms of “victory” and “defeat” irrelevant. This is why the ongoing evictions of the Occupy camps are not really effective: lacking a single vital center—the heart or the head—and thus diverging from the model of an animal-like organism, this political movement can afford to lose intensity in some of its branches without compromising its vitality. In defiance of formal logic and the principle of non-contradiction, it can die and live at the same time.

Given the rapprochement of the current political events and plant ontology, it would not be far-fetched to think of the Occupy movement as the possible prolegomenon to a liberation that would exceed its human scope, experimenting, among other things, with a respectful approach to plants and permitting us to imagine the outlines of what I would like to term “a vegetal-human republic,” the stuff out of which philosophy as the history of the future is made. It is noteworthy

that on November 8, 2011, Occupy Wall Street hosted “Guerrilla Gardening,” a group whose goal it is to occupy “ill-used land to support the communities and ecosystems to which that land rightfully belongs.”<sup>5</sup> As this short description makes obvious, Guerrilla Gardening does not subscribe to a total instrumentalization of plants in the name of subsistence agriculture and self-sufficiency. It aims, instead, to reconstitute to the vegetal members of ecosystems, as much as to human communities, their right to exist, to grow, and to flourish. Skeptics will doubt the possibility of a peaceful coexistence there where some members of an ecosystem devour the others. But, for those who interpret existence existentially, in terms of its possibilities and processes rather than objective outcomes, the difference in attitude will make all the difference. When human beings grow *along with* plants, accompany their growth, acknowledge and respect their ontological possibilities (including but not limited to the possibility of becoming a source of nourishment) and rights, then we no longer consume vegetal beings as though they were nothing but storehouses of caloric energy, sources of biofuel or heating, fabrics not yet woven, construction materials not yet chopped down, blank supports for writing and printing... To resist like plants, on a common front, which does not amount to a confrontation, we would need to learn from them, to be and to live with them, to let something of them flourish in us.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, for instance, the following telling statement: “For our movement to grow we need new, outdoor space.” <http://occupywallst.org/article/ows-hunger-strike-new-outdoor-occupation/> Or, as an Occupy DC protester, Michael Patterson, put it: “We are not just going to march for two or three hours.

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We are here to stay 'cause the system needs to change."

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/occupy-dc-protesters-arrested-in-standoff-over-makeshift-shelter-at-mcpherson-sq/2011/12/04/gIQAEld9TO\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/occupy-dc-protesters-arrested-in-standoff-over-makeshift-shelter-at-mcpherson-sq/2011/12/04/gIQAEld9TO_story_1.html)

<sup>2</sup> The same is true for Portugal's 1974 "Carnation Revolution," when these red flowers were placed inside the barrels of guns to symbolize a peaceful end of the dictatorship, and, for Georgia's 2003 "Rose Revolution," among others. I thank Patricia Vieira for this reference.

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Beck offered this formulation at a public lecture "What Europe do We Want?" organized by Ikerbasque (Basque Foundation for Science) in Bilbao on December 1, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* is forthcoming from Columbia University Press in 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://occupywallst.org/article/planting-real-seeds-change-guerrilla-gardening-and/> and <http://www.guerrillagardening.org/>

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## **Occupy Wall Street and Everything Else: Lessons for the Study and Praxis of Religion<sup>1</sup>**

Author: Joerg Rieger  
Wendland-Cook Professor of Constructive Theology  
Perkins School of Theology  
Southern Methodist University  
Dallas, Texas  
E-mail: jrieger@smu.edu

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### **OCCUPY WALL STREET AND EVERYTHING ELSE: LESSONS FOR THE STUDY AND PRAXIS OF RELIGION**

Despite a seemingly never-ending stream of detractors who claim that the message and the goals of the Occupy Wall Street Movement are not clear, there is nothing unclear about the observation of a fundamental tension between the one percent and ninety-nine percent.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is not hard to see why there is such a pervasive sense that Wall Street and other symbols of economic power need to be occupied.

Wall Street, as the location of the New York Stock Exchange, is arguably one of the most occupied places in the world. It is occupied by the unilateral logic of what is now called the one percent. This logic determines not just economic transactions; the course of politics, culture, the media, and even things traditionally considered as private such as personal relationships and religion, are also shaped by the logic of the one percent. Perhaps the major manifestation of this logic in the realm of the economy at present is the assumption that the prosperity of the one percent and government support in the form of tax cuts and bailouts will lead to the creation of jobs and economic prosperity for all. This logic is backed up by various schools of neoliberal capitalism,<sup>3</sup> and evidence to the contrary or dissenting voices are ignored or systematically ridiculed.<sup>4</sup>

It is against this unilateral logic, which holds Wall Street occupied, that the Occupy Movement protests: this logic does not seem to work, and it has led to the suffering of millions of people. The result is a clash as this unilateral logic seeks to reassert itself when challenged by other forms of logic, a clash that is perhaps best symbolized by the destruction of over 4,000 books of the open library of Occupy Wall Street.<sup>5</sup>

Like the American public, many of us are beginning to see the problems with Wall Street and the economic model of neoliberal capitalism more clearly because we are confronted by them in everyday life. But what about our settings in religious communities and the academy? Are we not different from Wall Street and neoliberal capitalism? In the academy, are we not proud of the fact that we allow and encourage different sets of logic and that we spend much time arguing about them? And even in our mainline religious communities, do we not also seek to allow room for different logics? Still, the question is the same: how many of these different logics support the logic of the one percent and how many support the alternative logics of the ninety-nine percent?

The Occupy Movement invites us to think about what other aspects of contemporary life are occupied, including the religious and even the personal. As Hannah Hofheinz, a graduate student from Harvard who was instrumental in organizing Occupy @ AAR/SBL—an event related to the Occupy Movement at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in November of 2011—stated, “I am occupied.”<sup>6</sup> If this is true, the question we will have to ask, both as persons who study and who practice religion, is whether our work is supporting the logic of the one percent, or whether it is supporting the alternative logics of the ninety-nine percent.

### **Binaries, dichotomies, and dualisms**

I am, of course, fully aware that contemporary academics are not supposed to think in binaries, dichotomies, and dualisms any more. In the postmodern academy, a rather diverse range of prominent theoretical models are in agreement on this point. For the record, let me note that I agree with some of the postmodern and many of the postcolonial critiques.<sup>7</sup> So why am I coming back to binaries, dichotomies, and dualisms in this context?

The key insight of the Occupy Movement, that there is a fundamental dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent, is new in the public conversation in the United States. Let me suggest, therefore, that we focus on it for now. To be sure, there are other insights of the Occupy Movement that are worth discussing, yet the dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent has implications for everything else. Unfortunately, even those who pick up on this dichotomy often fail to understand that it is not merely a matter of economics, and thus move on too quickly to other topics.

For the most part, in the United States we have thought of ourselves as a society where classes do not matter. And even when we have talked about underprivileged groups, like for instance the poor or the homeless, we have not emphasized the class dichotomy that is part of our reality.

Talking about class as social stratification, one form in which class discourse appears to be acceptable in the United States, also tends to lack a deeper sense for class dichotomy.<sup>8</sup>

At first sight, proclaiming a dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent may look overly simplistic and perhaps even ignorant. Could its insistence on this dichotomy be the Achilles Heel of the Occupy Movement? Nevertheless, if we look at the numbers, this dichotomy appears to be quite real. After all, the notion itself was introduced by a respected economist and Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, and the problem to which it refers has been noted by many others.<sup>9</sup> One percent now own more than half of the wealth in the United States and, what is more important, this wealth puts them in a position of incredible power. To be even more specific, in the United States, 400 individuals have more wealth than sixty percent of all Americans.<sup>10</sup> Things have changed dramatically in the past decades. While in 1962 the wealthiest one percent of households averaged 125 times the wealth of the median household, in 2009 the wealthiest one percent of households averaged 225 times the wealth of the median household.<sup>11</sup> As Jared Bernstein reports: “Between 1979 and 2007, incomes grew by 275 percent for the wealthiest 1 percent of households, 37 percent for the middle 60 percent of households, and 18 percent for the poorest 20 percent of households.”<sup>12</sup>

Rather than being a classless society, even the most basic numbers show that the United States is more divided by class than any other country in the so-called First World, including China. In terms of income inequality, the United States is peer with Cameroon, Madagascar, Rwanda, Uganda, and Ecuador.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the often-invoked notion of class struggle is an everyday reality, although it is waged mostly from the top down rather than from the bottom up. This class struggle is what has created and exacerbated the dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent, clearly visible today in a situation where the one percent have consistently gained even in times of economic crisis, while the ninety-nine percent are gaining less and less even in times of economic progress.<sup>14</sup>

Not only the wealth but also the influence of the one percent is quite real. We know this at various levels. We all know, for instance, that politics is heavily influenced by the interests of the one percent. We also know that the boardrooms are controlled by the interests of a small minority of large shareholders.

But what does this mean for religious communities and the academy? In my book accessed on January 2, 2012 *No Rising Tide* I have shown how the dominant logic also shapes the way we think and what we believe.<sup>15</sup> Images of God prevalent in religious communities, for instance, are commonly shaped by dominant images of power and might. In the past, God was often envisioned as a heavenly patriarch or monarch. Today, God is often envisioned, consciously or unconsciously, more like a heavenly CEO, who controls the fate of the world just like a CEO controls the fate of the company. In the academy, the mentality of corporate America is at work as well. Top administrators function increasingly like CEOs and are remunerated accordingly, while faculty find themselves more and more regulated and controlled. One of the latest trends is the introduction of outcomes evaluations in teaching. In addition, much research is driven by the interests of the one percent, which provide funding through corporations and donations.

What would change if religious scholars and members of religious communities were to identify with the ninety-nine percent, to which we belong, instead of the one percent? This question, rather than the misguided but common urge to blame the one percent for ethical or moral shortcomings, is at the heart of my inquiry. As I show elsewhere, this newly emerging sense of solidarity—I now call it deep solidarity—can help us deepen our understanding of the religious traditions, which we study or practice. Jesus's parables, for instance, acquire fresh layers of meaning when read from the perspectives of the common people, and so do many others of our religious traditions.<sup>16</sup>

Some may wonder why I am not calling for the reconciliation of the ninety-nine percent and the one percent at this point. Is it not the role of religion to bring the factions back together again? This appears to be the position of Katharine Henderson, president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York. She notes: “There’s so much polarization in our country now, and demonization of one side of the other. ... As religious leaders, we want to be ‘repairers of the breach’ ... So the question is how we can come together, Wall Street and Main Street, to come up with solutions that are going to work for all of us?”<sup>17</sup> To Henderson’s reference to the prophet Isaiah, one might respond with a quote from the prophet Jeremiah: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). While demonization is wrongheaded, true reconciliation can only happen, when we understand the “wound” of the ninety-nine percent, and that there is no neutral ground in the middle, not even for religious leaders or experts.

## **Class**

In the coming years, we will need to pay more attention to the dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent not only in economics but in all other areas of life all the way down, as it were, including the study and praxis of religion. This brings us back to the topic of class, which is perhaps the most neglected topic in American society, as well as in the study and praxis of religion. When we do talk about class in these contexts, we usually do so in terms of social stratification. Yet, as I have noted above, talk about social stratification tends to avoid talk about the relationship between the classes.

When we talk about the dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent on the other hand, we are talking about a relationship. This relationship is marked not only by differentials of money but also, and perhaps more importantly, by differentials of power. The notion of class can help us to think about these kinds of relationships. It helps us to think more clearly about questions like, Who wins and who loses? And, Who is in control and who is not? Raising these questions in non-moralistic fashion helps us understand better what is going on and what the possible alternatives might be. In this context, a clearer understanding of class might help us avoid another danger, which has to do with moralizing on these topics.

Before I continue, let me emphasize that the purpose of addressing the notion of class is not to demonize anyone; the opposite is the case. If we begin to understand that the challenge we are facing has to do with structural class relationships, we can stop demonizing individuals. In terms of the old Christian saying, we can learn to hate the sin but love the sinner, although the notion

of hate is not really helpful here either, because what we are after is the redemption of sin. The problem of which dichotomy of the one percent and the ninety-nine percent ultimately reminds us, is not the greed of individual CEOs or bankers. To the contrary, the problem is precisely that CEOs or bankers have little choice in this matter as individuals. When this is clear, it makes sense that even individual members of the one percent occasionally join in with the concerns of the ninety-nine percent; a small movement of the one percent supporting the ninety-nine percent is already under way.<sup>18</sup>

The big news when talking about class is that ninety-nine percent of the population appears to be in the same boat. While there are, of course, significant differences within the ninety-nine percent, we share in common that the economy is working less and less to our benefit and that our voices matter less and less in all areas of life, including religion. This insight is especially important for those who have traditionally considered themselves middle class. Our current economic and political reality shows that there is no safe place in the middle. While the economy keeps going in cycles, the fortunes of more and more people do not. Even in the context of the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression, some have gained while almost everybody else has lost. These losses can be expressed in terms of people's net worth, their retirement accounts, the quality of their jobs and benefits, but most importantly in terms of the power they hold both at work and in the public realm.

In this context, considering the reality of the working class helps us deepen our understanding of the ninety-nine percent. In the current economic climate, workers are treated as disposable and expendable, exposing the enormous gap between their interests and the interests of big business. This gap also finds expression in U.S. law, according to which the CEOs of corporations are accountable to the interests of their stock holders rather than to the interest of their workers. CEOs, beginning with Henry Ford, have been successfully sued by their dominant stockholders if they showed too much concern for their workers.<sup>19</sup>

This dichotomy between CEOs and workers finds expression not just in terms of the levels of income (the differentials of which are staggering), but also in terms of the levels of power, which these respective groups hold not only at work but also in many other areas of life. The fate of the middle class resembles more and more the fate of the working class; the savings and stock holdings of the middle class are rather small and the quality of their conditions of work as well as their influence continue to erode.<sup>20</sup>

To avoid confusion let me add that this relation of the one percent and ninety-nine percent also throws light on global relationships. Considering the subject of class from the perspective of financial stratification, some have argued that inhabitants of the so-called First World all belong to the one percent when seen from a global perspective. This argument, however, overlooks the fact that class is not just a matter of money but also of power and relationships. Members of the working class in the United States, who may own a house and a car, have fairly limited amounts of power, and their power is further undermined by concerted attacks on unions and other organizations, which represent their interests. Workers in Latin America, on the other hand, may be better organized in trade unions and may have more rights.

In any case, the pressures that workers in the United States experience show increasing family resemblances to pressures experienced in the so-called Third World; not only are there parallels in the exploitation of work, as work is more and more commodified and the benefits and rights of workers are slashed, there are increasingly also parallels in the experience of being expendable, as twenty-three percent of the workforce in the United States are currently unemployed.<sup>21</sup> Some of these differentials can, of course, also be addressed in terms of money. The average CEO in the United States makes 300 or 400 times more than a worker, while top investors earn as much as 20,000 times as average workers.<sup>22</sup> These differentials are far greater than the difference that separates working people in the United States and in the so-called Third World, including the casually employed: U.S. workers hardly make 300 or 400 times more than workers who make \$5 a day in a Mexican maquiladora (if they did, they would earn somewhere between \$375,000 and \$500,000 a year), let alone 20,000 times as much. Add to that rising poverty rates—29 percent of all children in Dallas County, for instance, live in poverty—and the parallels between the common people become even more striking.<sup>23</sup> In addition, keep in mind that the wealthy one percent exists elsewhere as well. After all, the richest person in the world at the moment is Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim Helú.

This insight that ninety-nine percent of the population may be in the same boat is of particular importance for academics who study religion and for the many members of mainline religious communities, most of which belong to the middle class. This opens the door for what I am calling deep solidarity. Whereas solidarity in the past for the middle class has often meant a decision of the will to side with those less fortunate, now we are beginning to understand that solidarity cuts deeper. Rather than understanding those less fortunate in terms of ourselves, we are now beginning to understand ourselves in terms of those whom we used to consider less fortunate. Without denying the differences, their fate is our fate.

In the past, members of the middle class have often felt that we were benefiting from the wealth and the power of the one percent. Even if we have not consciously reflected on it, we have considered ourselves to be in closer proximity to the ruling class than to the workers. We have intuitively agreed with the often-repeated but never proven mantra of neoliberal capitalism that a rising tide will lift all boats.

The ways in which we have studied and practiced religion have often reflected this unspoken alliance with the one percent, who often fund our academic projects and our religious communities. In academic circles, this problem can be seen in terms of the strange absence of certain topics that are otherwise vital to everyday life. It is no accident, for instance, that there has been virtually no sustained reflection on class and economic inequality. And in the rare cases when class has been the subject in religious studies and theology, it is discussed without much attention to the relationships and tensions between classes.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, in the world of religious praxis, there are growing efforts to organize religious communities like corporations. Even theology has provided support for these efforts, for instance when the Lordship of Jesus Christ is considered in terms of the power of a CEO.<sup>25</sup> And even if this implication is not developed explicitly, there is a striking absence of reflections on how the theological notion of the Lordship of Jesus Christ might support alternative power in both church and world.<sup>26</sup>

## **What we are up against**

The Occupy Movement has helped us develop a clearer sense of what we are up against, thus broadening our horizons in much-needed directions.

Sensing that something is not right, many Americans have taken to criticizing the government. When something goes wrong, even in the economy, the government gets blamed. But if government control is the root of all evil, as many Americans believe, why is the influence that the one percent exercise over the government so rarely addressed? While there are indeed problems with American democracy and the role of the government, the Occupy Movement reminds us of the fact that we can only get to the bottom of these problems if we consider the power of the one percent. While government officials are at least elected and vetted to some degree by the public, the members of the one percent have no public mandate.

While conservative Americans criticize the government, others often blame what they see as misguided cultural developments. Consumer culture, in particular, is frequently lifted up as a problem. In this context, the solution is seen as taking a countercultural stance. What is overlooked here, however, is the fact that culture, and consumer culture in particular, is not natural but produced by the powers that be. Much of the desire that drives consumerism is not a natural human instinct, but has to be produced and reproduced through advertisement and the media.<sup>27</sup> So while there are indeed problems with American culture, the Occupy Movement reminds us of the fact that there are hidden interests that drive our culture, linked not to the interests of the ninety-nine percent but of the one percent. Without this deeper analysis, becoming countercultural is not really an option.

Others yet blame religion as the core of all deception. The so-called new atheists, for instance, accuse religion of indoctrinating people and misleading them. Yet religion as such may not be the problem. While religion has indeed been used and shaped many times by the forces of empire, there are also examples of religion joining the resistance and providing alternatives. In the history of the United States, for instance, religion has been deeply involved with progressive movements at their core, most recently the Civil Rights movement, the peace movement, and the labor movement. The Occupy Movement's sense of the differential between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent also throws new light on the phenomenon of religion. Like politics and culture, religion also needs to be seen in the context of the clash between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent.

As we begin to understand what we are up against in terms of the dichotomy between the one percent and the ninety-nine percent, we are not proposing to instigate class struggle. This is, of course, one of the most popular accusations against the Occupy Movement in the United States. But what this accusation overlooks is the fact that class struggle has been waged for a long time, mostly from the top down, and against both workers and the middle class. Today we see such struggles, for instance, when the right of workers to unionize is challenged more strongly than in most other capitalist economies, or when the employed and the unemployed are intentionally played off against each other in order to maximize the profit of the corporations. We also see

class struggle in the discussions on the topic of taxes, as any reduction of the tax burdens of the wealthiest individuals and corporations implies significant additional burdens for the rest of society, that is, for the ninety-nine percent.

The study and the praxis of religion have much to learn from these reflections. As we study and examine distorted forms of religion, we need to ask deeper questions as to the cause of these distortions. What is behind idol worship and idolatry, which is so prevalent in mainline religion?<sup>28</sup> Recall that already in the biblical narratives of the Exodus, idols were never mere religious symbols. The golden calf was an expression of wealth and power that rivaled the power of the liberating divinity of the Exodus (see Exodus 32).

## **Alternatives**

Understanding what we are up against cannot be a goal in itself. The goal is to be able to develop alternatives. The Occupy Movement embodies some of these alternatives, however imperfect. Perhaps the most important issue of all is that the emerging power of the ninety-nine percent does not seek to duplicate the power of the one percent. In addition, the emerging unity of the ninety-nine percent differs from the unity of the one percent. This has implications for solidarity as well.

Let me explain what I mean. The unity of the one percent might be described in terms of uniformity. It is the uniformity of economic theory (the belief that a rising tide lifts all boats), it is the uniformity of politics (the single-issue politics of tax cuts to the wealthy), and it is the uniformity of religion (God as unilaterally controlling top-down power). Solidarity in this context means to support others who are exactly like oneself.

The unity of the ninety-nine percent, by contrast, can only be unity in diversity. Even if we tried, uniformity is not an option here. In terms of economic theory, the unity of the ninety-nine percent is the acknowledgment of the existence of a variety of people-centered economic theories. In terms of politics, it is the acknowledgment of more substantial forms of democracy, and in terms of religion is the acknowledgment of a multiplicity of popular traditions that preach not only concern for the least of these but a reversal of power according to which all can participate in the production of life. The traditions of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and of Jesus in the Gospels exemplify such popular traditions. Solidarity in this context means deep solidarity, the support of others who are different yet experience similar predicaments.

By the same token, the power of the one percent is a sort of unilateral power. It is the power that moves from the top down, from one of the many. In the boardrooms of the corporations, CEOs make the decisions considering the interests of the major stockholders, backed up by executive boards that they themselves have appointed. In politics, the power of the one percent is readily visible in campaign financing and the host of lobbyists that congregate in Washington DC. This is, of course, merely the tip of the iceberg, as the influence of money in politics goes much deeper. In religion, the unilateral power of the one percent can be seen in structures that show no respect for the concerns of the people. This is not only a problem of some of the classical

hierarchical traditions, but it is also a common mode of operating in those contemporary church formations that mimic the corporations.

The power of the ninety-nine percent, by contrast, can only be diversified power. One of the most interesting features of the Occupy Movement that is much discussed currently, is that it has not been driven by a small number of easily identifiable leader figures. This is not a weakness, it is rather a strength which has to do with alternative forms of power. In economics, providing room for the diversified power of all that are involved in production is a new model, which has produced some success in various contexts.<sup>29</sup> In politics, power is based on the concerns of the community. The Occupy Movement has practiced this power, for instance, in its assemblies and the so-called stacks, where all who seek to speak line up and get to express themselves; some of the stacks have gone one step further by giving priority to the voices of underrepresented groups. Decisions are made using the consensus model of participatory democracy, organized by discussion facilitators rather than leaders.

What would the diversified power of the ninety-nine percent look like in religion? A time-honored model can be found in the Latin American base communities, where people read the Bible together in the context of everyday life. These communities include people from all walks of life, and there are no privileged interpreters, despite the fact that trained theologians are often part of these groups as well. In the context of the Occupy Movement, religious faith has also played a role. Members of the clergy have been involved as chaplains to the movement, workshops have been conducted on religious topics, and books on religion have found their ways into the libraries of the movements.<sup>30</sup> Yet religion does not seek to dominate, but becomes part of the larger quest for liberation. As such, it can find its own voice and contribute its distinct insights without falling into the trap of seeking to achieve one-percent-like control.

## Conclusions

Let me conclude with a personal report. After almost twenty years of membership in the American Academy of Religion, I participated in an event called Occupy @ AAR/SBL. Unlike any of the hundreds of events that took place at the annual meeting in San Francisco in 2011, this event was organized by students at short notice. Word was spread by e-mail and Facebook, bringing together about eighty people who took time out of their busy schedules and canceled other commitments. The conversation began not with theoretical reflections but with reports from people involved in the various Occupy Movements throughout the United States and Canada. In a second part, five short statements were presented, addressing the need to deal with the Occupy Movement not as if we were able to observe it from the outside but from the inside, located within the dichotomy of the one percent and the ninety-nine percent.

In both the presentations and the conversation, there was no pretense of academic neutrality or objectivity, as is often the case in such meetings. Most of the participants seemed to be clear that sides needed to be taken, and so the academic task of critical reflection dependent became self-critical reflection. This is perhaps the biggest challenge that the Occupy Movement presents not only to the study of religion but also to the praxis of it.

In response to one of the questions directed at my presentation, part of which is formulated the current article, I noted that not taking sides in life also means to take sides. In situations of great power imbalance, even those who choose to stay neutral and objective become part of the problem. This is one of the lessons of the Christian churches in Nazi Germany, where we learned in hindsight that the declared neutrality of some churches supported the status quo, and this is one of the lessons we have to learn again today. Nevertheless, nothing is ever predetermined. Even the members of the one percent can choose to join the ninety-nine percent.

The bigger question, however, has to do with the ninety-nine percent: will they understand what side they are on, and shape their theory and praxis accordingly, or will they continue with business as usual, which tends to support the interests of the one percent? The question of class presents us with these issues in a new way, picking up old religious and political traditions, including the self-understanding of the early Americans as “We, the people.”

What was perhaps most impressive about the Occupy @AAR/SBL event was that the usual posturing of powerful individuals and their respective schools was kept to a minimum. And even the graduate students made little effort to imitate the behavior that they see many of their professors engage in. The conversations were shaped by an awareness that we are dealing with something bigger than individual positions and schools.

Here lies one of the major lessons of the Occupy Movement for the study and praxis of religion. Our work, if it is to provide genuine alternatives, can no longer be done in isolation. For the study of religion this means, that we need to understand not only how our work is always already shaped by the scholarly community, and how it contributes to it; we also need to understand how our work is shaped by the larger tectonics of power as they shape up in religion, politics, and economics. In other words, our work is shaped in the dynamics of the tensions between the one percent in the ninety-nine percent, and contributes to this situation in one way or another. For the praxis of religion this means that we need to understand how religious communities are embedded in this larger context and what differences are being made. The question is not 1st of all what religious communities should or ought to do, but what is happening and what the viable alternatives are, based on observation and real-life praxis.

In conclusion, an understanding that unless we take sides, our sides will be chosen for us, creates new forms of unity and solidarity. We have not seen such unity and solidarity in a long time, as unity and solidarity are usually produced by the status quo, which suggests that we are all the same. Yet if it makes any sense to talk about the unity of the ninety-nine percent, it can only be unity in diversity. Rather than trying to re-create the unity of the one percent, the ninety-nine percent become only stronger when they respect the various diversities in their midst, in terms of the full gamut of ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, and other markers of difference. This is the deep solidarity about which I was talking earlier: understanding that we are all in the same boat, it is imperative that we take each other more seriously in our differences while working together toward the alternatives that provide life for everybody.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a short presentation at “Occupy @ AAR and SBL,” American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, November 20, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For very moving personal introductions of people of the ninety-nine percent and their stories, see <http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/Introduction>.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss this logic in both its economic and its religious forms in my book *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> In this context, the charge of socialism is frequently leveled against any opponent, not as a description of a serious economic alternative, but as a boogey man.

<sup>5</sup> Cassandra Garrison, “Occupy Wall Street says NYPD destroyed 4,000 books,” *Metro Boston* (November 23, 2011), on the web: <http://www.metro.us/boston/local/article/1032300--occupy-wall-street-says-nypd-destroyed-4-000-books>, accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Hofheinz, “Occupy Privilege,” presentation at “Occupy @ AAR/SBL,” American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, November 20, 2011. Hannah also described Harvard as a place for the reproduction of the one percent.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, my articles “Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World,” in: *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, American Academy of Religion, Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion, ed. Joerg Rieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and “Liberating God-Talk: Postcolonialism and the Challenge of the Margins,” in: *Postcolonial Theology: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> On October 19, 2011, the Wall Street Journal posted a percentage calculator, titled “What Percentage Are You? On the web: [http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2011/10/19/what-percent-are-you/?mod=wsj\\_share\\_facebook&mid=549](http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2011/10/19/what-percent-are-you/?mod=wsj_share_facebook&mid=549), accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>9</sup> According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Joseph E. Stiglitz of Columbia University talked about income equality in the United States as a matter of a wealthy one percent versus the remaining ninety-nine percent in a Vanity Fair article in May of 2011. Dan Berrett, “Intellectual Roots of Wall Street Protest Lie in Academe,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 21, 2011, A 8. See also economist Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR, 2000), who estimates that in the United States 62 percent belong to the working class, 36 percent belong to the middle class, and two percent to the ruling class, *ibid.* 10, 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> These numbers have been verified by PolitiFact fact, on the web: [http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2011/mar/10/michael-moore/michael-moore-says-400-americans-have-more-wealth-/,](http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2011/mar/10/michael-moore/michael-moore-says-400-americans-have-more-wealth-/) accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>11</sup> These numbers are from a report by the Economic Policy Institute. See Sylvia A. Alegretto “The State of Working America’s Wealth, 2011,” EPI Briefing Paper #292 (March 23, 2011), page 7. On the web: [http://epi.3cdn.net/2a7ccb3e9e618f0bbc\\_3nm6idnax.pdf,](http://epi.3cdn.net/2a7ccb3e9e618f0bbc_3nm6idnax.pdf) accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>12</sup> Jared Bernstein, “Inequality Growing, and Government Doing Less About It,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 27, 2011. On the web: [http://www.offthechartsblog.org/inequality-growing-and-government-doing-less-about-it/,](http://www.offthechartsblog.org/inequality-growing-and-government-doing-less-about-it/) accessed 12/7/2011.

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<sup>13</sup> Max Fisher, "Map: U.S. Ranks Near Bottom on Income Inequality," *The Atlantic*, September 19, 2011. On the web: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/09/map-us-ranks-near-bottom-on-income-inequality/245315/>, accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>14</sup> Already in the 1990s, when the global victory of capitalism was declared, the global market no longer benefited the workforce of the so-called first world automatically, as it had done for some time. This is discussed in William Wolman and Anne Colamosca, *The Judas Economy: The Triumph of Capital and the Betrayal of Work* (Reading, Mass.: Addison--Wesley, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> See note 3, above.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, my reinterpretation of Jesus's parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matt 18:23-34. Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 112-11.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in: Jay Lindsey, "Religion claims its place in Occupy Wall Street," AP Press Report (Oct. 24, 2011), on the web: <http://news.yahoo.com/religion-claims-place-occupy-wall-street-171204904.html>, accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>18</sup> "We are the 1 percent. We stand with the 99 percent." On the web: <http://westandwiththe99percent.tumblr.com/>, accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>19</sup> In a court ruling of the Michigan Supreme Court in 1919 (*Dodge v. Ford Motor Company*), the brothers John Francis Dodge and Horace Elgin Dodge, owners of 10 percent of Ford stock, challenged Ford's decision to cut dividends in order to invest in new plants and grow production and numbers of workers, while cutting prices. The court ruled in favor of the Dodge brothers, arguing that a corporation is organized primarily for the profit of its stockholders, rather than for the benefit of its employees or for the community. See the brief entry in *Wikipedia*, "Dodge v. Ford Motor Company," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodge\\_v.\\_Ford\\_Motor\\_Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodge_v._Ford_Motor_Company), accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>20</sup> There's a lot more to be said about the reality of the working class. See, for instance, the studies that are done under the heading New Working Class Studies. See, for instance, John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, eds., *New Working-Class Studies* (Ithaca: ILR, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> For some of the unemployment statistics that back up these numbers see: [http://www.shadowstats.com/alternate\\_data/unemployment-charts](http://www.shadowstats.com/alternate_data/unemployment-charts), accessed on 12/7/2011.

<sup>22</sup> In 2006, the average CEO made 364 times more than an average worker in the United States. However, there is another number that is perhaps more telling and much less known. The difference between the salary of an average worker and the top twenty private-equity and hedge-fund managers in the United States is in a different league altogether: on average, members of this latter group earned 22,255 times the pay of the average worker. Sarah Anderson and others, *Executive Excess 2007: The Staggering Social Cost of U.S. Business Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies and United for a Fair Economy), 9, on the web: [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org), accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>23</sup> "Study finds growing child poverty among Dallas' prosperity," *Dallas Morning News*, November 18 2011, on the web: <http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/20111118-editorial-study-finds-growing-child-poverty-among-dallas-prosperity.ece>, accessed on January 2, 2012. This number is up from 19.2 percent in 2000.

<sup>24</sup> In religious studies see Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); in theology, see for instance Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

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<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, my reflections on the ancient confession that Jesus is Lord in Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), chapter 1.

<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, chapter 4.

<sup>28</sup> This is one of the key questions that let American liberation theology has raised, most recently Jung Mo Sung, *The Subject, Capitalism, and Religion: Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies, New Approaches to Religion and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> A well-known example is the Mondragon Corporation, which is a Spanish federation of worker cooperatives, which are owned by their workers and governed democratically. At present, it is the seventh largest Spanish company, employing more than 80,000 people at the end of 2010. For more information see: <http://www.justpeace.org/mondragon.htm>, accessed 12/7/2011.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, <http://occupyfaithnyc.com/>, and <http://www.occupyfaith.com/>, accessed 12/7/2011.

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## **It is *the* history, stupid!: A Dialectical Reading of the Utopian Limitations of the US ‘Occupy’ Movements**

Author: Santiago Slabodsky  
Assistant Professor of Ethics of Globalization  
Claremont Lincoln University  
1325 North College Avenue  
Claremont, CA 91711  
Email: sslabodsky@cst.edu

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## **IT IS *THE* HISTORY, STUPID!:: A DIALECTIAL READING OF THE UTOPIAN LIMITATIONS OF THE US ‘OCCUPY’ MOVEMENTS**

### **Abstract**

In this article I analyze the political consequences of the utopian projects undertaken by contemporary protest movements. In particular I focus on the mobilization of a-historical imageries by the US Occupy Movement. The paper is divided in three parts. First I survey current alternative online sources, mostly from communities of color, to query the movement’s reading of history. I argue that by trying to combat contemporary material dispossession the movement effaces the material-racial structure that accounted for its prior privilege. Second I analyze this phenomenon in depth by utilizing Marx Horkheimer’s dialectical critique of the a-historicity of utopian movements. I particularly emphasize how decontextualized goodwill facilitates the creation of idealized futures and fictional pasts and ultimately reproduces the same system that is under critique. Finally, I conclude by posing questions to the actors involved in the process.

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## 1. You are History

“Around 8pm, on Wed. night [October 26, 2011], the 300 people who have been occupying the lawn of Los Angeles city hall for the past three weeks split themselves into two hostile groups” journalist and activist Natasha Vargas-Cooper reports. “On the one side there’s the hardcore politicos-get-shit done process freaks.” In other words, and in a slightly different language, the partisans of a “narrowly focused social movement bent on economic reform.” On the other side, Vargas-Cooper reports “there are people who think they are starting a new society.” A society that “not only rejects income inequality, but any sort of action that enables one group to repress any other.” To underscore this mutual antagonism, the reporter details a discussion regarding the camp’s code-of-conduct. The first group, headed by the “General Assembly,” attempted to impose limitations on smoking and drinking in the camp and started “policing” the common space. The second, informally called the “People’s Forum,” rejected any formulation of rules and called for a “new regime” to end the “disease of perfectionism.”<sup>1</sup>

The debate itself is interesting. But both the narrative of the scene and the impression of many of the activists present in some of these debates, resulted in a tragicomic evocation of Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian*. In the 1979 film there is a scene in which the 4-member *Popular Front of Judea* (PFJ) shows its disdain for the “splitters” of the 1-member *Judean People’s Front* only to finish confusing themselves with nomenclature and unable to discern the actual organization to which each belongs. Subsequently, the PFJ encounters a third group, the *Camping for Free Galilee*, while trying to commit the same political kidnapping. Instead of collaborating they start killing each other before the bemused gaze of Roman soldiers.<sup>2</sup> In the article Vargas-Cooper recalls “One man, standing at the center” who “yelled into the megaphone ‘You don’t represent us anymore! We are taking over! We are the People’s Forum!’” A filmophile activist present at the event told me that she was glad that the original group was not the Forum of People but the General Assembly. Otherwise she would not have been able to contain her laughter. The inaction of the LA police, not necessarily known for its friendly behavior, should come as no surprise.<sup>3</sup> As happened two millennia prior, they are probably astonished with the scene.<sup>4</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, there is a fundamental contextual difference between *The Life of Brian* and Occupy LA. The first represents a 1<sup>st</sup> century ethnic struggle against a foreign occupier. The second, as I will here argue, is a hegemonic movement blind to its own history. The description of Vargas-Cooper and the pictures that are posted next to the article are redolent of the debate’s racial structure. We find “a beautiful Slavic faced” young woman and some “purposefully well dressed white men.” As a Latina, Vargas-Cooper does try to locate the “Chicano” presence. But it is hard to find either in the pictures or in the text a speaking Chicano/a voice. Both sources acknowledge the minority presence in one of the most heavily Latino/a populated cities of the US. But neither is able to identify any meaningful role they could assume within either the revolutionary or the reformist wings of the movement. Even in an article written by a Latina reporter who struggles to locate their presence, their voices appear to remain silent.<sup>5</sup>

A good number of articles and blogs report and sometimes reproduce the same limitation. *The New Yorker*, for example, interviews seven occupiers in one of the most diverse cities of the

world. Only one is a minority.<sup>6</sup> An Afro-American activist, Greg Tate, formulates the “Top 10 reasons Why So Few Black Folk Appear Down to Occupy Wall Street.” Among the reasons, he clearly argues that the majority of the protesters are white individuals between 18-29 years-of-age. Revolting Afro-Americans cannot join the protests because they comprise almost half of America’s incarcerated individuals.<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of the absence of minority voices in large occupy movements can be heard from the West (L.A.), East (New York) and Midwest (Chicago). Natives, for example, propose to radically change the concept of occupation by initiating spin-offs like (Un)Occupation of Native Lands or De-Colonization.<sup>8</sup> Others minorities have decided to denounce the movement, while some “white purists” are explicitly against the incorporation of “racial diversity,” which, they suggest, would “ruin” the Occupy movement.<sup>9</sup>

The clear hegemony of young white protesters is only the tip of the iceberg. According to Afro-American activist Kenyon Farrow, the problem is not the movement’s overwhelmingly white presence. In his own words “it not about the diversity of the protests.” It is, on the contrary, “the rhetoric used...that makes OWS [i.e. Occupy Wall Street] unable to articulate, much less to achieve, a transformative racial justice agenda.” Farrel particularly focuses on the movement’s construction and utilization of imagery. He points out that the naïve use of minority symbolism is unable to understand the role of historical memory: “One of the first photos I saw from the Occupy Wall Street protests was of a white person carrying a flag that read “Debt=Slavery.” He strongly rejects this comparison. Farrel argues that American society “exploits poor and working-class people” without a doubt. But this exploitation is not slavery. By making this comparison the protesters are, first, undermining the racial structure put in place after the Atlantic slave trade that is reproduced in contemporary American society; and second using the same cheap rhetoric of the “Right” speakers who, for example, assimilates the extension of “health care to slavery.”<sup>10</sup>

Farrel protests for this misuse of minority imagery by both Right and Left but is particularly annoyed by those who are presumably representing the 99%. This misuse does not allow the protesters to understand that historically they have been beneficiaries and not victims of a racial system that is today used as propagandistic anathema. By using this imagery, Farrel argues, the white population is unable to trace its own privilege in the structural construction. While the socio-economical reading of Farrel needs further development and is sometimes muted by the superficiality of the blogosphere, the political implication of his claim need to be considered. One of the main reasons for the lack of minority presence may be the reaction to the misuse of minority history. This misuse obscures the deep historical connection between, for example, slavery and structural development and renders a proportion of the population unable to acknowledge the privilege inherent in the historically racialized system they are acknowledging.

The debate underway between the reformers (General Assembly-type) and the revolutionaries (Forum’s People-type) seems to dimly understand the weight of material- racial constructions. Both factions ignore the political implications of history. I ask my reader whether the party affiliation of the person (presumably a man) carrying the sign drawing an equivalency between debt and slavery makes any difference whatsoever. We can think once, we can think twice and even a third time and there is no significant difference between the realist reformer and the radical revolutionary. This is beyond political correctness and it is about falling into a false dichotomy in the struggle for what is presented as a just word. Otherwise stated, in its attempt to

put forward a catch-all call (a movement that goes beyond differences, this time racial) the current debate ignores the historically racial structure in the US. In this way the movement makes palpable Edward Said's protest against Marxian criticism, which appeared the same year as Monty Python's political satire. Said opens his iconic book *Orientalism* by citing and critiquing Karl Marx's "18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" thus: "they can't represent themselves, they must be represented." The use of historical memory in the context of the absence of minority voices can be seen as a new stage in the same representational project.<sup>11</sup>

This proposal, therefore, is not new in contemporary cultural theory. But scholarship has been not only critical, but also celebratory of the new movement. New-age Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have insisted on the dislocation of the universal class into a new agent for change: the multitude. Let us take a look at both the definition and the objective of this new class. The post-post-structuralist authors try to avoid a clear definition of this trans-class, trans-race, trans-gender, trans-trans phenomenon. But a few traces can be found throughout their work. They claim that the multitude is being forced to engage in a "universal nomadism" trying to find jobs well beyond their immediate social, economical and geographical contexts. This displacement, perhaps counterintuitively, offers the possibility of breaking barriers and, ultimately, creates the necessary class consciousness needed to defeat their creators, the Empire. Hardt and Negri's mandate is clearer than the definition. The objective is to achieve a "global citizenship" that effaces any difference in the interests of a social movement for the universal common good or the 99%. It will be an ideal space of justice and truth that will overcome, as the People's Forum proposes, all oppressive class, gender, and racial hierarchies once and for all. The imagery they use should be resonant to any reader of Farrell. Hardt and Negri praise "the multitude's resistance to bondage –the struggle against slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity, a people." Again, the minority struggle becomes universalized by the descent of the perpetrators and not the oppressed.<sup>12</sup>

What the two-sides of the Occupy Movements and Hardt and Negri are missing is the weight of history in the creation of these differences and the depth of historical imagery of the oppressed in the construction of social alternatives. In other words, by focusing on current material dispossession (that no doubt currently exists) they are unable to see the sources of the wealth which precede their dispossession. There are two possibilities of reading the white man (which I safely assume him to be) carrying the sign. A Gramscian reading would indicate that a group of hegemonic actors require the cooptation of alternative histories into a catch-all movement. This movement sanitizes all alternative thinking since, in the best of the left-wing Hegelian contexts, the alternative always arises from within the system. But there is an alternative reading I will call decolonial which goes hand-in-hand with the alternative movements named above. It goes beyond the totalitarian conception of the Hegelian philosophy of history and recognizes that alternatives can emanate from outside the system. The adoption of symbology does not obey the logic of cooptation. It rather shows that for the first time, at this scale, populations that conceived of themselves as structurally "entitled" (let's say, for example, white college graduates) are harmed by the same system that has limited access to racialized populations for centuries. And these groups are orphans of historical models that can help them to think in alternative ways.<sup>13</sup>

The problem in the US, however, is not the "orphanity" of a historical reading that can be useful to working- and middle-class whites including the General Assembly, the People's Forum, and

the Multitude. It is the inexperience of historical reading itself. Said discerns a lack of interest in American consumer society in reading history and learning its memory, weight, and lessons. This is epitomized for him by the American phrase “you’re history.” For the Palestinian intellectual it means that the worst insult for an American individual, who is always looking for the last gadget, is to be classed as sublated, overcome, outdated. In other words, being history.<sup>14</sup> In this way “memory and its historical past are effaced.”<sup>15</sup> From a Saidian perspective, the Occupy movement’s problem is not only the co-optation of minority imagery and the “orphanity” of related histories. It is that the former hegemonic strata of American society is just too inexperienced to understand memory and history in such a way that can be meaningful for the movement. In other words, they mobilize imagery of minority communities and create an a-historical movement that is blind to the historical structure of oppression. The movement is critiquing current material dispossession without understanding the racial-material structure that rendered its members previously privileged. In this way they fall into the trap of what critical theorist Max Horkheimer calls utopian thinking.

## **2. Dialectics of Utopianism**

There is a genre critique that is all too often overlooked. It is the trans-national interconnection of minority groups in different parts of the world that are able to crudely witness the reality of a society and its limitations. They are far from being a universal class as portrayed by classical Marxism. But since they suffer in their bodies the extreme manifestation of given systems, they are able to understand the limitations of the proposals that supposedly articulate the common good (i.e., the 99%).<sup>16</sup> For the last 30 years in the US this includes a long line of minorities such as Afro-Caribbean Aime Cesaire in the inter-/post-war, Afro-Caribbean/Algerian Frantz Fanon in the process of political decolonization, and Palestinean Edward Said. Right now those voices emerge in Afro-American blogs and articles like those of Farrell and Tate. Just prior to the Holocaust, Jews were the European minority engaged in the same critique.<sup>17</sup> Among the latter, one of the most interesting cases is Frankfurt school theorist Max Horkheimer. In his pre-Holocaust article “Beginnings of the Bourgeoisie Philosophy of History” Horkheimer presents a clear understanding of the dangerous nature of utopian projects. Let me point out the basic structure of his critique and later show how the US Occupy Movement falls into de-historicizing utopia that carries the opposite consequences that the actors of the movement seek to affect.<sup>18</sup>

Horkheimer describes utopian models as the nostalgic “expression of the desperate classes that bear the cost of transition between one economic form to another.” They are the “displaced classes” that were once privileged and now resist their demotion from what they consider their natural, self-entitlement, place of privilege. The examples Horkheimer discusses are the “great Catholic Utopias” of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, especially Thomas More and Tomasso de Campanella. They belonged to a time in which the Church ruled and the vassals or artisans were supported by a combination of guild corporations, Lord’s protection, and Church’s charity. But their displacement by the new mode of production rendered the vassals ‘liberated’ and “the fate of the migrating, plundering hordes of hungry farmers was horrendous.”<sup>19</sup>

The authority of the Church, displaced by the “bourgeois class,” was unable to attend the social welfare demands and rapidly, in comparison to the political stability of Medieval Times,

declined in power. It is not a surprise, therefore, that the utopians “realized that profit was becoming the driving force of history” and “reacted to these new conditions with the cry: private property is at fault!... and suddenly [came] to regard private property as the devil.” In the words of Thomas More that Horkheimer cites: “Everything gets resolved into that subtle and dangerous element: the desire to possess.” This critique is by no means restricted to theological circles. Catholic utopians, Horkheimer argues, are the historical forerunners of liberal humanists, some of them paradoxically anti-clerical. One of them is the celebrated Jean-Jacques Rousseau who inspired diverse revolutionary movements. Rousseau ironically claims: “The first man, who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, ‘This is mine.’ And found people simple enough to believe him, was the true funder of civil society.”<sup>20</sup> The objective of the utopians, ecclesiastical first but humanistic later, was clear (i.e. “to achieve a holy [or democratic?] community on earth that would replace the laws of free competition”).<sup>21</sup> The central indicators of utopian thinking in Horkheimer are alarmingly similar to the Occupy process analyzed above: economic displacement, forced migration, lost of welfare-centered institutions, protest for the changing social representation, understanding of profit and private property as evil, corporate egotism and finally the possibility of a trans-class movement that rejects the values of a new stage of the mode of production.

Let us start by reflecting on some of these combined factors in general and the reaction of both representative and grassroots actors in the 16<sup>th</sup> (Catholic Utopias) and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Occupy Utopias) in particular. The representation of the now-displaced was undertaken by institutions whose responsibility was the general welfare: the Church in the 16<sup>th</sup>, the State in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Thomas More cries for the suffering of the displaced. The sympathy of President Barak Obama or former president Bill Clinton for the movement is not reducible to political opportunism. On the contrary, it proceeds from an acknowledgment of the institutional failure of welfare in taking care of the displaced. The struggle for a health plan in the administration of both can be seen as a proof of this concern.<sup>22</sup> The cry in the 16<sup>th</sup> century comes from the hierarchy of the Church and in the 21<sup>st</sup> from the hierarchy of the State. Both of them have lost the possibility of creating social peace through welfare and, in this context, have lost legitimacy.

Something similar has occurred with the grassroots actors. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the displaced actors were the servants (as opposed to non-European slaves or colonized natives, absent in the account of the utopians) who were once ‘protected’ by the lord, guild and/or church. But the transition made them migrate to the cities as free labor forces and caused a humanitarian calamity detailed by More. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the displaced are what Ferrel calls the “white working and middle classes” (as opposed to minorities including the descendents of slaves and the colonized whose voices are absent from the major movement). They also suffer the displacement made by the new stage of capital and, as Hardt and Negri explained-above, forced migration. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, More critiques the sinful nature of profit and capital by conceiving of a new perfect society called utopia. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the most revolutionary forces intend to create a new perfect society that escapes the sin of the current one that was created out of the sinful ethos of unlimited greed.<sup>23</sup>

This ideal construction is what prompts Horkheimer to elaborate an analytical distinction. On the one hand he analyzes “the critique of what is” and on the other “the representation of what should be.”<sup>24</sup> We explored above the limitations of the critique. Let us do the same with the

project. Horkheimer argues that utopians are people of goodwill who, once displaced, confront injustice by de-contextualizing their own history. In this way they mobilize unrealizable models that not only act as a consolation but also serve to strengthen the status-quo. Furthermore, they put forward those repressive elements in society that are not completely developed since they are presented as the only viable option. In other words, their inability to read history leads them to misunderstand, accept, and reproduce an unjust system. These projects, in Horkheimer's words, are elaborated "without consideration of historical circumstances." The utopians think that it is possible to "establish a new society simply on the grounds of free, rational, human resolution." However, these projects are a "dreamland of historically bound fantasy."<sup>25</sup> The project is not located in the future but actually in an "idealization of the past" and its struggles. Horkheimer cleverly points out that that More and Campanella portray the "hell of the Medieval Ages" as a "heaven" of ante-capitalism. The utopians are unable to identify, however, the "pre-modern seeds" that created the system they try to destroy. By being unable to build a viable alternative they leave the system, as broken as can be, as the only viable alternative.<sup>26</sup>

So let us return to the Occupy movement. There have been different explanations as to why the movement does not present a comprehensive alternative project. Some activists, anxious about the lack of a project, work out their fears by using black humor that almost make a parody of the movement.<sup>27</sup> But the desire for a new society on the part of either the reformers or especially the revolutionaries seems to be the norm across the board.<sup>28</sup> This society, however, is being built in association with an idealization of a particular past replicating the limitation of 16<sup>th</sup> century utopians. This past in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is struggles such as is the abolitionist and the civil right movements that transpired in the 1860s and 1960s. The problem, however, is not only that they base their future on a problematic reading of the past. The struggle is not abolitionist because they are fighting for themselves ("white working and middle classes") and not for others (African slaves). It is not a civil right struggle either because, as Ferrel has shown, the association of debt and slavery is a fallacy.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, their project is premised on models that reproduced suffering after the struggle. African slaves were 'liberated' but continued to be segregated after the 1860s. Afro-Americans were 'liberated' but are overrepresented by 300% among the incarcerated population after the 1960s. In other words, paraphrasing Horkheimer, they have transformed the 'post-60s' (post-1860s and post-1960s) hell into their heaven. This idealization of other people's misery only reinforces the blindness they have to the source of their own privilege prior to being dispossessed. These may be the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> reasons "why So Few Black Folk Appear Down to Occupy Wall Street."

To now go beyond Horkheimer but retain his rhetoric, the Occupiers present the current model as the only viable one by basing their project on a "dreamland of historically bound fantasy." They create a project out of their "rational and free choice" of a historical reading that is extremely problematic and as a consequence they actually re-displace instead of incorporating the same communities they supposedly represent. Incorporation into an already developed system could be problematic but there is not even an attempt of doing more than representing these populations that, today, comprise at least half of the American population. The "white working and middle classes," Farrell would say, confuse their history. They do not evaluate their similarity to the European displacement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century but they read their own parochial history by presenting themselves more as African slaves than as white Europeans displaced by a fundamental change in the mode of production. In this way they not only limit their acceptance

beyond the Euro-American communities by offending minority memory, but also misunderstand the location of their history.

The historical issue at stake is not a need for the inclusion of difference into the system, as was the case in the abolitionist or civil right movements. By making the abolitionist and civil rights movement struggle the heaven of the protesters without understanding the material conditions that lead to them, they are alienating the same social groups that were, presumably, liberated in the 1860s and (again?) in the 1960s. This is, without a doubt, no heaven for the presumably liberated. Perhaps it is a heaven for those individuals of the hegemonic structure who felt relieved from guilt. But it is not for the presumably liberated whose history is being subsumed and the roots of their suffering erased. Again Said is right when he says that American hegemonic discourse is afraid of understanding history.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Thinking Beyond

The critique to the American Occupy Movement is in no way a critique of the protests underway throughout the Middle East, Latin America, East Asia and Europe itself. It is merely a caution about the utopian nature of local movements that fall into dead-ends due to their inability to relate to history. In no way, however, do I intend to argue that the suffering of the white displaced populations in the US is not real. I am just making the case that they are blind to their privilege and reproduce the same racial-material critique they are formally denouncing. There may be some possibility of alternatives to the current system that emerge on American soil. The analysis of the utopian character of these movements makes me suggest, however, this is not one of them.<sup>31</sup>

The movement will inevitably follow its course and, fairly or not, will take center stage in the revolting movements across the world. In this context I would like to conclude my paper by asking two collective actors the following questions. First, to the Occupiers: Is it possible to engage in a struggle by renouncing the historical representation of the racially dispossessed? How would the movement change if there is an acknowledgment of the racial pre-determination of material suffering? Would the movement be ready to accept the aforementioned radical change or is still hopeful that the minorities will join and legitimize a movement that is mostly foreign to them? Second, I would like to also acknowledge, as we have seen above, that there are minority movements in this context that are engaging in a very original struggle that goes beyond the limits that I presented above. These are, for the lack of a better term, the Decolonial Un-occupy movements. For these movements I would also like to ask a few questions: what is the role of tran-class and trans-race alliances in the construction of an alternative? Should you find in the Occupy movements a resource or, given the limitations raised here and elsewhere, would it be interesting to create trans-national alliances with groups in the Global South and Global East?

Unfortunately the author of this article has no ability to answer any of these questions. He is just reflecting on a history that is not being engaged by American hegemonic discourse. Reflecting in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century utopian projects, one could perhaps agree with Marx's philosophy of history when he announces that history "repeats itself twice...the first time as tragedy, the

second as farce.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps we are living in a Monty Pythonesque world, witnessing act two. So conceived, the farce is not the material suffering but its utopian reaction.<sup>33</sup>

## Endnotes

\* The author would like to thank Rachel Gostenhoefer for her wonderful editing suggestions. In addition he would like to thank students of his classes of Postcolonialism and Ethics of Globalization at Claremont Lincoln University for discussing and critiquing some of these ideas.

<sup>1</sup> Natasha Vargas-Cooper, “The Night Occupy Los Angeles Tore itself in Two”

<<http://www.theawl.com/2011/10/the-night-occupy-los-angeles-tore-itself-in-two>> (October, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Terry Jones (dir.), *The Life of Brian* (London, UK: Python Monty Pictures, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> The Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) reputation for brutality became well known in the aftermath of the 1991 Rodney King affair. As we shall see below, the racial profile of the activists may also be a factor in the passive posture the LAPD have assumed with respect to Occupy. An in-depth analysis of the LAPD’s post-King era can be found in Lou Canon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> According to the report, “Occupy Los Angeles has been among the most peaceful of the nationwide Wall Street protests” only two isolated incidents raised the LAPD’s concern. See The Associated Press, “2 Violent Incidents at Occupy LA Worry Police” <[http://www.mercurynews.com/news/ci\\_19272488](http://www.mercurynews.com/news/ci_19272488)> (November, 2011). In both cases the police acted only after the factional infighting debilitated the movement.

<sup>5</sup> Vargas-Cooper, “The Night.”

<sup>6</sup> Ian Duncan and Valeriya Safronova, “Seven Protesters, Five Questions”

<<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/11/five-protesters-five-questions.html>> (November, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Greg Tate, “Top 10 reasons Why So Few Black Folk Appear Down to Occupy Wall Street”

<<http://www.villagevoice.com/2011-10-19/news/greg-tate-top-ten-reasons-why-so-few-blackfolk-appear-down-to-occupy-wall-street/>> (October, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> See Jorge Rivas, “(Un)occupy Albuquerque Connects Corporate Greed to Fight for Native Land”

<[http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/10/unoccupy\\_albuquerque\\_in\\_respect\\_to\\_indigenous\\_new\\_mexicans.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/10/unoccupy_albuquerque_in_respect_to_indigenous_new_mexicans.html)> (October, 2011). A variation of the movement can be taken from the exceptionally energetic Decolonial Oakland Movement that is an exception to the problem we see in this article: Robert Desjarlait, “Decolonization and Occupy Wall Street,” <<http://www.racialicious.com/2011/10/11/>> decolonization-and-occupy-wall-street/ (October, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Unamused, “Racial Diversity Continues to Ruin ‘Occupy Wall Street’”

<<http://unamusementpark.com/2011/10/racial-diversity-continues-to-ruin-occupy-wall-street/>> (October, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Kenyon Farrow, “Occupy Wall Street’s Race Problem” <<http://www.prospect.org/article/occupy-wall-streets-race--problem>> (October, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1995), xii.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 61, 361-2. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent understanding of the epistemological privilege that can be found in alternative social sources, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Una Epistemologia del Sur* (Barcelona: Siglo XXI, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Several activists said they felt uncomfortable when a good proportion of the Occupy movement debate was taking place online with ‘occupiers’ that rarely graced the camp after the first nights. Beyond the critiques among sides, it is important to understand how the activism of a ‘gadgety society’ can reach the public only through virtual spaces.

<sup>15</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xxi. For a classical engagement related to the Frankfurt School (below), see Hebert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (New York: Beacon Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> On a more theoretical note I would call this phenomenon ‘relational histories’ after the proposal made by Ella Shohat in “Gender Cartographies of Knowledge” in *Taboo, Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1-11.

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<sup>17</sup> An excellent account on the Jewish internal critique in the European context can be seen in Michael Lowy, *Redemption and Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). I have also written on the subject for cases before and after the Holocaust. See Santiago Slabodsky, “De-Colonial Jewish Thought and the Americas” *Post-Colonial Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Purshumottama Bilimoria and Andrew Irvine (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2010), 251-272 (before the Holocaust) and “Emmanuel Levinas’ Geopolitics: Overlooked Conversations between Rabbinical and Third World Decolonialisms” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* XVIII.2 (2010), 147-165 (after the Holocaust). In this way I try to establish a conversation with de-colonial scholars who think of the Frankfurt School as the limits of European thinking differently from the de-coloniality emerging in the Global South. I argue that the Frankfurt School is ethnic writing adumbrated by Jews during European persecutions. For an example of the former, see Walter Mignolo, “El Pensamiento Decolonial: Desprendimiento y Apertura. Un Manifiesto” in *El Giro Decolonial*, Santiago Castro-Gomez y Ramon Grosfoguel eds. (Bogota: Siglo del Hombre eds.), 32-43.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the Frankfurt School subscribes to (and articulates) a heterodox Western Marxism. In this particular article I will go beyond its historical context and present them in an alternative “history of ideas” approach. See Max Horkheimer, “Beginnings of the Bourgeoisie Philosophy of History” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 313-388. It is important to note that Horkheimer was following a traditional critique of “scientific socialism” vs. “utopian socialism” as explored for Marx and Engels. See Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998) and Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 1907).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 363-375.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, The original source can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse of Inequality* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I good understanding of the limits of Rousseau to understand these problems can be found in Walter Mignolo, “El Pensamiento Decolonial,” 42 and Emmanuel Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 89-104.

<sup>22</sup> The New York Times, arguably one of the best read American newspapers worldwide, reports this phenomenon in Eric Lichtblau, “Democrats Try Wary Embrace of the Protests” [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/us/politics/wall-street-protests-gain-support-from-leading-democrats.html?\\_r=1&scp=2&sq=obama%20occupy%20wall%20street&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/us/politics/wall-street-protests-gain-support-from-leading-democrats.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=obama%20occupy%20wall%20street&st=cse) (October, 2011). Please read the difference between the official ‘wary’ title and the most ‘decisive’ link name.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to make the following distinction. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century only the representative (Church) was in power and it used the idea of displacement of the vassals (that, in the Middle Ages were not existing in optimal conditions but were still not the slaves or natives) to put forward their project. In the 21<sup>st</sup> both the representatives (State) and grassroots (white middle classes) were in power and later on displaced. As an outcome in the 16<sup>th</sup> the utopian project came from the hierarchies and in the 21<sup>st</sup> from the grassroots movements. But the critique and proposal turns out to be the same.

<sup>24</sup> Horkheimer, “Beginnings of the Bourgeoisie Philosophy of History,” 245/371. Horkheimer is more generous than I with respect to the possible utilization of the critique. But we both agree on the need of making a clear critique of utopian projects.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-244/368-369.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandra Petri, “A Modest Proposal for the Occupy Movement” in *Washingtonpost.com* <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/post/a-modest-proposal-for-the-occupy-movement/2011/11/07/gIQAvIVD0M\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/post/a-modest-proposal-for-the-occupy-movement/2011/11/07/gIQAvIVD0M_blog.html)> (November, 2011)

<sup>28</sup> The affinity in the slogan with the 1968 movement of students/workers in Paris is striking. Both of them seem to be calling to “*L’imagination prend le pouvoir.*” The connection, however has not been widely explored. There are two reasons to account for this. First, 1968 was a diverse movement including post-Holocaust stateless Jews and decolonizing Magrhebi students and workers. Second, the US movements seem to ignore past movements and the lessons of history. An excellent analysis of the movement and the events in translation can be found in Alain Schnapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The French Uprising, November 1967-June 1968. An Analytical Record* (New York: Beacon Press, 1971).

<sup>29</sup> The 1968 movement and its critique have much to offer the US movement. The critique against the universalization of particular minority suffering by a hegemonic group is not novel. Emmanuel Levinas has made an excellent case against the 1968 French protestor slogan: “We are all Jews.” See Emmanuel Levinas, “Judaism and Revolution” in *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 94-120.

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<sup>30</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xxi

<sup>31</sup> A new phenomenon is slowly emerging. Despite the fact that the Arab Spring and other manifestations anteceded the Occupy movement, the US media is trying to use local vocabulary to understand all the movements worldwide. See Nate Rowling: Who Should be TIME 's Person of the Year 2011? The 99%”

<[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2098471\\_2098472\\_2098498,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2098471_2098472_2098498,00.html)>

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteen of Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in *The Portable Karl Marx* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 287.

<sup>33</sup> It is important to notice that recently some very provocative scholars, well versed in critical theory have re-evaluated the conception of utopia as a possibility beyond the a-historical interpretation. I still insist on the need to go beyond this limit but for those readers still interested in salvaging the concept, please see Nestor Miguez, Joerg Reiger and Jung Mo Sung, “Humanizing Transcendence: *The Human Condition and the Other in Beyond the Spirit of Empire* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 100-136.