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LIBERALISM AND THE POLITICS OF OCCUPY WALL STREET

JASON HICKEL

Since last September, Occupy Wall Street has emerged as the most widely known and commented-on social movement in North America and Europe. It started in Manhattan when a small group of activists – outraged by the bank bailouts and inspired by the Arab Spring, the student protests in Britain, and the “indignado” movement in Greece and Spain – took control of Zuccotti Park under the catchy slogan “We are the 99%”. They were evicted in November, but not before organising huge marches through New York, shutting down key bridges and ports, inspiring occupations in dozens of cities across North America and Europe (including the one in London, which I participated in) and, most importantly, bringing the problem of widening social inequality into razor sharp focus. Since the end of the 1970s, neoliberalism – in the form of monetarist and supply-side economic policies – has helped drive wealth disparities to unprecedented levels. In the United States, the share of national income going to the top 1% has more than doubled since 1980 from 8% to 18%, restoring levels not seen since the Gilded Age. The same is true of Britain, with a jump from 6.5% to 13% during the same period. The top 5% of American households have seen their incomes increase by 72.7% since 1980, while median household incomes have stagnated and the bottom quintile have seen their incomes *fall* by 7.4%.^[1] To make matters worse, CEO salaries increased by an average of 400% during the 1990s while the federal minimum wage actually *decreased* by more than 9% in real terms.^[2]

Occupy succeeded in shedding light on this pattern of elite accumulation, brought it into mainstream consciousness, forced the corporate media to talk about it, and provided space for the elaboration of popular outrage. It aroused tremendous excitement by breaking the taboo on critique induced by the neoliberal mantra that “there is no alternative”. But what happened to the fervour that propelled Occupy last fall? How do we explain the movement’s rapid decline after a period of such promising efflorescence? In the following paragraphs I will argue that Occupy’s initial traction lay in its departure from the *apolitical* forms of political engagement that have come to dominate liberal progressivism over the past few decades. But this escape has been partial and incomplete; Occupy’s consensus process and demand-free platform, which rely on certain aspects of the liberal ethic (namely, the fetishisation of diversity, tolerance, cooperation, and inclusiveness), have eroded its ability to create compelling alternatives to the neoliberal status quo. While we cannot discount the role of state repression and the violent eviction of Occupy encampments in contributing to the movement’s decline, it is clear that much of the problem has to do with weaknesses related to the movement’s own commitment to certain ideological precepts and tactics. Here I want to illuminate how these are based around a view of politics that profoundly misreads the nature of power, and therefore undermines our ability to create a more just world.

The Apolitical Politics of Liberalism

The Occupy movement can only be understood by placing it in the context of shifts in popular politics over the past few decades, specifically the rise of liberalism as a dominant motif of Western culture. I first began to think about the nature of liberalism in the West by comparing it to liberalism in South Africa, where my ethnographic research has been based. In South Africa, liberalism is not always a popular thing. In the 1980s, as the liberation struggle against the apartheid state gained steam, migrant workers from rural Zululand violently sabotaged the revolution that was being led by the African National Congress (ANC). While they obviously embraced the cause of racial equality, they regarded the ANC’s broader liberalism – the idea that all people are fundamentally equal and endowed with the same

intrinsic rights – not only as unnatural, but as outright destructive. For them, liberalism threatens to dismantle the hierarchical structure of kinship and reduce the world to a primordial state of chaotic, sterile sameness. By equalising all persons across boundaries of gender, generation, and genealogy, liberalism dissolves the reproductive differences essential to social life, erodes the very foundations of fertility and health, and opens the door to all manner of misfortune. As one of my informants put it: “Everything is falling apart in South Africa because of democracy and the Bill of Rights. Liberalism is bringing apocalypse. People are dying every day.” One could debate whether Zulu vigilantes have a legitimate critique of modern egalitarianism or are simply seeking to manipulate ideas about “traditional” hierarchy in order to maintain their hold on (patriarchal) power. But one thing remains certain: many people literally regard liberalism as a harbinger of social death.^[3]

In the Euro-American context, by contrast, liberalism is generally taken for granted as natural and good across the political spectrum, and the full emancipation of the individual is regarded as the apex of modernity. In the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that democratic societies – such as the United States – were premised on assumptions about underlying human equality.^[4] According to this view, all individuals partake of a singular, abstract humanity such that every person, regardless of social position, is just as good as anyone else (exactly the premise that many rural Zulus reject). Endowed with this “imaginary equality” of substance – even in the face of significant inequalities of income, opportunity, and status – each person is free to reason for herself and express her ideas without constraint, for all opinions are equally valid and all have equal access to truth. These ideas about personhood constitute the bedrock of liberal thought, and, as Webb Keane observes,^[5] are central to contemporary Western narratives about modernity and progress from Luther and Voltaire to Thoreau and Nietzsche. Liberalism is good, according to these narratives, because it breaks the hold of hierarchies and allows people to express themselves as authentic, autonomous individuals with enlightened rationality.

During the late 1960s, liberal ideas gained fresh traction as popular social movements leveraged them to demand greater personal freedoms, including freedom of speech, freedom of sexual expression, women’s liberation, civil rights for minorities, abolition of the draft, and so on. David Harvey has suggested, however, that the desire for individual freedom that motivated these movements was co-opted by neoliberal ideologues looking for ways to justify radical market liberalisation and the destruction of “stifling” state regulations.^[6] The outcome was a divide within the left between traditional, class-based approaches to social justice (which proffered a direct critique of capitalism) and the new wave of “identity politics” (which is often celebrated within neoliberal discourse). The other upshot of this period in political history, it seems to me, is that ideas about the importance of “diversity” and “tolerance” – the buzzwords of post-1968 liberalism – have come to dominate the political logic of the left. Make no mistake: the identity politics movement made important gains against entrenched social exclusions by pushing for the principles of diversity and tolerance. But these ideas become problematic inasmuch as they begin from the assumption that universal inclusion and equality is not only possible, but – *pace* Tocqueville’s observation – latent in the very fabric of human existence. By placing hope in an imagined utopia of diversity and tolerance, this version of liberalism fundamentally misapprehends the nature of power in capitalist society.

In a recent article, my co-author Arsalan Khan and I argued that popular progressivism today tends to promote a form of critique that mystifies the coercive dimensions of capitalism and offers “alternatives” that ultimately advance its cause.^[7] Consider the recent proliferation of consumerist activism. If you care about the suffering of poor people in the third world, you can help by buying Ethos water, TOMS Shoes or items marked Product Red. The promise these brands make is that a portion of their profits will go to alleviating poverty in developing countries; indeed, they market their products with the

underlying formula, “Buy our product, save the world”.^[8] This may be better than nothing – as apologists argue – but the problem is that this type of “activism” transforms a deeply felt political urge (the urge for substantive social change, or revolution) into a recuperative project for capitalism; individuals believe they can fix the problems caused by capitalist consumption by simply engaging in further consumption. This paradigm takes Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism to new extremes: the fact that these products appear redemptive obscures to an unprecedented extent the violent relations of production that lie behind them.

If consumerist activism has appropriated the desire to do something about poverty and inequality, so too has the concept of “development”. The development fantasy, as I see it, betrays a profound misunderstanding of global economics, and obscures the fact that the wealth of the first world *depends* on the poverty of the third world; the Euro-American lifestyles that development wants to universalise are only possible because of the systematic exploitation of the labor and resources of poorer countries. The mythology of development allows Westerners to pretend to address the problem of global poverty without ever having to confront their position within a global class divide, to address the problems caused by capitalism without ever questioning capitalism itself. As with the “anti-politics machine” that James Ferguson has described,^[9] this is a form of supposed critical engagement that is deeply depoliticised. Because of this failure to recognise and understand power, many development practitioners continue to believe – sincerely, it seems – that prescribing harsh doses of radical market deregulation will fix the problem of underdevelopment.

A similar critique could be made of the latest wave of popular feminism. Consider the performer Lady Gaga, who declares herself a feminist. For her, liberation is a matter of freedom of personal expression, freedom to choose sexual identities, and freedom to play with gendered symbols on a poststructuralist landscape of indeterminate meaning – all of this enabled by gratuitous commodity consumption. Gone are the substantive issues of material inequality, distribution, work, wages, and exploitation that defined the feminism of earlier eras. What we have instead is a form of feminism that is deeply complicit with – and even celebratory of – capitalism; a form of feminism that is depoliticised at its core. The same might be said of Komen, the U.S. firm behind the breast-cancer research campaign whose pink ribbons have come to stand in for feminist activism in America today. The Komen campaign has been self-consciously scrubbed of politics in order to mobilise support for women’s issues without appearing to threaten the patriarchal status quo. Instead of facilitating serious dialogue around women’s health and access to affordable medical services (to say nothing of wages and work), Komen-style feminism calls us to buy specially marked cosmetics and blush-hued accessories.

These trends have one thing in common. They all represent a form of progressive politics that fails to understand that the problems of capitalism are, at base, problems of power. Consumerist activism, development discourse, and pink-ribbon feminism all partake of the liberal fallacy that good will, cooperation and compromise will suffice to fix the intractable problems of poverty and inequality – problems that are imagined to be static and given, as if outside the realm of history and politics. Nobody is really to blame for these problems, so the thinking goes, and we all have something to gain from fixing them. The Obama campaign leveraged this same apolitical ethic to win the 2008 elections on a vague platform of bipartisanship, unity, and “hope.” Political conflict, according to this view, is illusory rather than substantive, a result of misunderstanding rather than a product of incommensurable interests. This makes sense within a liberal framework that – given its commitment to tolerance and diversity, which proceeds from the imagined absence of difference – carefully eschews all forms of antagonism and moral fundamentalism. In other words, liberal progressives have abandoned the tactic of hegemony: they are unwilling to establish absolutist, us-versus-them narratives. And the right has been more than happy to claim this empty ground; as Thomas Frank has pointed out, in the

United States (and increasingly in the UK) conservatives have appropriated the anti-elite imagery of the traditional left to channel moral outrage against regulators and latte-sipping liberals instead of bankers and billionaires.^[10]

The Rise and Decline of Occupy Wall Street

The significance of Occupy becomes apparent when viewed against this backdrop. Occupy represents a substantive shift in progressive political discourse because it has clearly and consistently called out the violent antagonisms intrinsic to capitalism. It is as if Occupy activists have embraced the words of Laclau and Mouffe in their critique of the anti-politics of liberalism: “The Left should start elaborating a credible alternative to the neoliberal order, instead of simply trying to manage it in a more humane way.” To do this, according to Laclau and Mouffe, “requires drawing new political frontiers and acknowledging that there cannot be a radical politics without the definition of an adversary. That is to say, it requires the acceptance of the ineradicability of antagonism.”^[11] In other words, Occupy recognises that the ideals of diversity and tolerance have no teeth against the violence of capitalist production and accumulation, and therefore seeks to depart from the decaffeinated forms of political engagement I described above. Occupy has done this by defining old adversaries in new and creative ways. In the postmodern politics of Europe and America, the notion of “class” is no longer up to the task of underwriting a compelling adversarial narrative. As anthropologists have long understood, class has never been an objective location and cannot be relied upon as a privileged locus of critique. Recognising this, Occupy successfully fabricated a new moral struggle – between “the 99%” and “the 1%” – which proved compelling enough to bring previously passive consumers out to participate in the kind of marches and protests that were once the preserve of militant unionists.

But the assumptions and subjectivities that organise liberalism continue to operate in the Occupy movement. Consider one of its hallmark characteristics, namely, its anarchist structure of non-hierarchical, consensus-based participatory democracy. Versions of this model have a long history in Western activism, but its use in Occupy was inspired in part by David Graeber, who developed it based on his ethnographic observations in non-state societies of rural Madagascar^[12] (see Harry Walker’s discussion of Graeber’s anarchism in the last issue of this journal^[13]). The model is an admirable one, in theory, and a refreshing alternative to the sham forms of democracy that operate in most modern nation-states. It allows for vigorous participatory debate, gives participants the sense that they have a direct stake in decisions, and prevents the movement from being easily managed and co-opted by the state. Most importantly, it exemplifies a principled alternative to the prevailing social order. As Graeber has put it, “One of the things that revolutionaries have learned over the course of the 20th century is that the idea of the ends justifying the means is deeply problematic. You can’t create a just society through violence, or freedom through a tight revolutionary cadre. You can’t establish a big state and hope it will go away. The means and ends have to be the same.”^[14]

In practice, however, the consensus model falters precisely because it takes the liberal ethic to its extreme: it forecloses the possibility of hegemony and vacates the place of power. Discussion about decisions carries on until everyone agrees, or at least until no one disagrees enough to block a given proposition. This alienates people who don’t have reams of spare time, and often means that discussions founder on the mundane logistics of camp life without ever graduating to the question of how to coordinate a coherent international movement. Also, the process of pursuing universal agreement means that important propositions often get diluted to the point of inefficacy. More importantly, however, the liberal ethic of inclusiveness, openness, and tolerance that informs the consensus process has made Occupy vulnerable to infiltrators hired by corporations and the state who

find it easy to sway the movement's agenda or to set up "affinity groups" that operate under the Occupy banner. Chris Hedges has pointed out that infiltrators masquerading as "Black Bloc" anarchists take advantage of Occupy's inclusivity – their refusal to exclude and their tolerance toward all perspectives – to set up violent actions in order to discredit the movement in the media so that it loses popular support.^[15] Occupy can do nothing to stop them; since no one controls the signifier, it is open to anyone who claims it.

The second – and related – hallmark of Occupy is its refusal to isolate and organise around specific demands. This has been a lightning rod for debate among high profile scholars including Slavoj Zizek and Naomi Klein.^[16] All agree that this open stance was initially important inasmuch as it allowed for an efflorescence of desire; it created a tantalising gap to be filled with endless imagination and attracted the broad constituencies that Occupy enjoyed in the first two months. Moreover, many considered the avoidance of demands to be tactically important given that demands have to be made to the very political establishment whose legitimacy is under question. But Zizek and Klein argued early on that Occupy would eventually have to close ranks around positive demands in order to maintain momentum. Unfortunately, the movement failed to make this shift while public support was still high. Some scholars have suggested that this failure reflects the weak ideological core of the movement.^[17] Occupy activists continue to insist that demands might alienate those who disagree with them and discourage diversity of opinions. Here we see the liberal ethic in full force – the same anti-politics attitude that underpins consumerist activism and Komen-style feminism. This objection proceeds in part from the construct of "the 99%" itself, which is imagined to be a coherent social bloc: as long as you're not a banker, a millionaire, or a politician, so the thinking goes, then you're one of us, part of the great mass of unmarked egalitarian humanity. As anthropologist Dan Segal has pointed out, this fiction obscures the sheer fact of social difference within the 99% in order to prop up the myth of consensus;^[18] it naively ignores the reality of political factionalism and incompatible power interests in favour of a form of inclusiveness that hamstring any serious forward movement.

In her reading of Zizek's work, Jodi Dean illuminates two key problems with the liberal ethic. One has to do with the paradigm of egalitarian tolerance: "To say that in our difference we are really all alike," she says, "prevents us from calling into question and emphasising specific differences as elements in larger, systematic patterns of violence."^[19] Since liberalism requires us to respect and seek to understand the particular identity and experience of the other, it moves us to reformulate systemic problems as personal issues. This tendency is exemplified in Occupy's consensus-based approach. A second problem has to do with liberalism's relativism; its refusal to make definite claims and to universalise erodes its ability to politicise. "Politics involves exclusion," Dean points out; "to say this is to accept the political necessity of division, of the division that orients and anchors struggle."^[20] That this element of definitude is missing in the Occupy movement becomes clear in its refusal to make demands. Chris Hedges – a staunch proponent of Occupy – elucidated similar points in a recent interview, saying: "You know, the funny thing about Occupy is that they think they're radicals, but they all function as good liberals... the activists come into the movement infected with liberal sensibilities."^[21] Hedges comes close here to identifying the fact that the "liberal sensibilities" to which he refers are deeply embedded in the fabric of Euro-American culture, as Tocqueville pointed out. The liberal approach to difference is so naturalised that it becomes exceedingly difficult to escape, even – and perhaps especially – for those of us who seek to craft a more just world.

Hobbled in this manner, Occupy has – in most of its incarnations, and particularly in London – been reduced to a series of small hives of determined activists who no longer enjoy much popular support. The tragedy of this is that, given Occupy's inability to craft a sustainable social movement, its

critique has failed to have any real-world impact toward crippling neoliberal patterns of capital accumulation. A recent article in *The Economist* pointed out that, following Obama's recovery plan for the United States, nearly every penny of recent national income gains has accrued to the top 1% of earners, all while Wall Street has continued to dole out record-breaking bonuses.^[22] Meanwhile, Occupy persists in dithering about whether or not to make demands. It seems to me that the movement might do well to glean a few lessons from earlier political struggles, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the labour movement in Britain, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Movements like these worked because they mobilised mass resistance by going door-to-door to build the capacity for sustained boycotts, strikes, and marches. Yes, community organising on this scale may require some sort of hierarchical structure and centralised control, but that does not automatically translate into coercive totalitarianism, or preclude the possibility of real democracy. The consensus-based model on which Occupy relies may be great for face-to-face groups making local decisions, e.g. in rural communities, but doesn't work as well against the military-industrial complex.

Conclusion

I noted above that many rural Zulus in South Africa object to liberalism because it seeks to eradicate what they hold to be necessary social differences. To apply an insight from Roy Wagner's essay on "analogic kinship,"^[23] people in Zululand believe that the differentiation of social elements is crucial in order to bring into being relational possibilities and the basic parameters for social reproduction. For them, difference is the basis of the "good". Putting aside whatever critiques we might have of this orientation (not least the inequalities that it may underwrite), we can accept that it clarifies a crucial point: that – as Tocqueville recognised – liberalism projects an imaginary equality over substantive social differences, be they differences of gender and status, as in the Zululand case, or differences of class power, as in the case of capitalism. In the closing pages of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels recognised that this tendency to imagine away difference in the latter sense poses a threat to the possibility of progressive politics. They offer a critique of what they call "bourgeois socialists" (by which they mean "philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organisers of charity... and reformers of every imaginable kind") for having bought into the fantasy of a society wherein all people might become bourgeois – in other words, for believing in the possibility of "a bourgeoisie without a proletariat."

Today, more than 160 years later, the tradition of liberal progressivism remains enamoured with exactly this fantasy. The utmost radical horizon of today's progressive imagination appears to be global capitalism with a slightly more human face. But while Marx and Engels' bourgeois socialists consciously wanted to "redress social grievances in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society," most progressives today are not so calculating; rather, their politics proceed from a sincere belief in the egalitarian premises of liberalism. Their celebration of the equality of all human beings makes it difficult for them to perceive the patterns of structural violence and incommensurable interests that underpin capitalism. This is why the proposed remedy to so many social problems is tolerance – an appeal to the common humanity of the other. Against this background, the Occupy movement stands out as something different, something firm and real in a wasteland of political simulacra. It now remains for Occupy to defend this outpost from being undermined from within by the residue of the same anaemic liberalism that the movement purports to stand against. A recent public art installation by David Shrigley near London's Waterloo Bridge captures this imperative perfectly. Alongside the image of a raised fist it reads, simply, "Fight the Nothingness" – a poignant mantra for resistance in a post-political age.

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