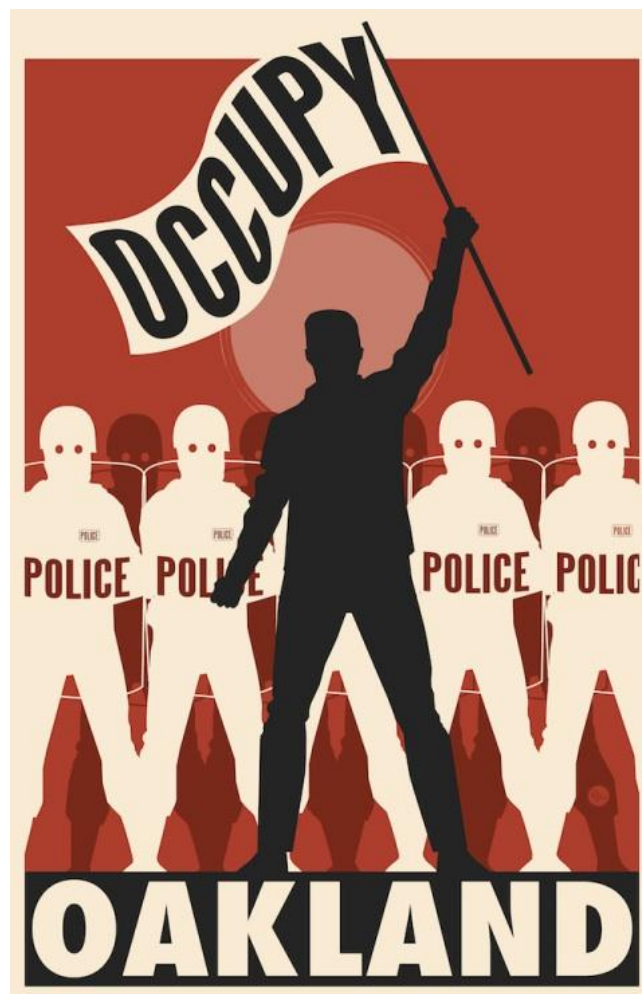


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Occupy and Education: Introduction

by Joseph Entin, Richard Ohmann, and Susan O'Malley



POSTER BY RICK BLACK

We were inspired by Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the rapid spread of Occupy across the United States and beyond. The commune-like camp sites, the general assemblies and use of the people's mic, the marches and demonstrations, the provocative refusal to issue demands, the proliferation of working groups and spokes councils, the creative explosion of revolutionary slogans and art, the direct condemnation of corporate finance and of the massive inequalities that structure our society, the "free university" teach-ins, the campaigns against foreclosure and debt—all these elements of Occupy gave us new hope that radical change might happen in our time.

Occupy has also been compelling for us as educators. It gives fresh life and meaning to many progressive ideas about education that *Radical Teacher* people have been debating, writing about, and trying to practice for years (decades, for some of us!). Occupy activists, artists, and teachers understand that education plays a crucial role in the reproduction of social hierarchies, and is therefore critical to the transformation of those hierarchies. Occupy has sprouted countless initiatives in popular education: open air assemblies, teach-ins, lectures, collaborative working groups, popular slogans such as the widely hailed "We are the 99%," posters, videos, and so on. For a sampling of the educational activities at OWS, see Jackie DiSalvo's article in this issue of *Radical Teacher*; on the movement's rhetorical strengths and innovations, see Ira Shor's piece. Occupy has been a pedagogical movement—not only, but markedly. Much to our satisfaction, Occupy has been a site of educational ferment and experimentation, a place to try things out, where new notions and practices are welcomed and embraced, even if some of them (inevitably) do not hold up. Occupy understood from its inception that knowledge production and learning are central to social and political struggle and that traditional relations of teaching and learning need to be reorganized to reflect the core ideas animating the movement. Indeed, many of the political ideas at the heart of Occupy—including its egalitarian ethos, its radical critique of existing institutions, and its commitment to building counter-institutions—have substantial implications for education. This issue of *Radical Teacher* explores a few of these implications and explores various forms of teaching and learning in, around, and about the Occupy movement.

Occupy Pedagogy

What would it mean to occupy education? Here are three theses about specific challenges that Occupy's direct, participatory democracy poses to traditional educational structures and practices.

Thesis 1: education takes place outside the classroom, as well as in it. Students and faculty from many New York colleges and universities have been active in OWS from the beginning, and have brought Occupy ideas, tactics, and energy to struggles within the university. Around the City University of New York (CUNY), students and faculty established working groups and sponsored teach-ins about key political issues on campus, most notably the CUNY Board of Trustees' decision to raise tuition, which

protestors opposed in vigorous demonstrations at Baruch College in the fall of 2011. At Brooklyn College, where one of us teaches, students brought the Occupy movement to campus by leading a series of general assemblies on the central quad and in the lobby of the administration building. These assemblies, groups and teach-ins were not only sites for political organizing, but also educational events, designed to share and spread knowledge. Although they were often short-lived, and at times attracted small numbers, they created spaces where all—students, faculty, staff, community members—could contribute what they know to an emergent understanding and critique of CUNY and its place in the city and society more generally. A similar spirit marked the 2012 "free university" sessions held in Madison Square Park, where anyone could teach a class, everyone was an educator, and there were no administrators in sight.

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Thesis 2: traditional hierarchies are overturned. Specifically, the logic of horizontalism subverts conventional teacher-student dynamics, in which the teacher is an "expert" or "authority" and students the relatively passive recipients of our superior knowledge. In general assemblies held on several CUNY campuses, students were the initiators and leaders, teaching *faculty* how to use hand signals and develop consensus. In speaking out about our experiences at CUNY, students and faculty learned together in a collaborative, participatory fashion that served to critique the way knowledge production takes place in most classrooms—even in those led by most progressive educators. The human mic lends the power of the collective to whoever is speaking, which allows students, who are usually positioned in classrooms as listeners and recorders, to assume a power they typically do not otherwise have on campus (think of faculty literally repeating student voices through the mic as a direct-democracy counterpoint to the more patronizing classroom paraphrase, in which we use our own words to recapitulate students' remarks). As the essay in this issue of *Radical Teacher* by Cathy Borck, Jesse Goldstein, Steve McFarland, and Alyson Spurgas suggests, implementing anti-authoritarian, collaborative pedagogies within a university classroom is no easy feat—but the attempt often generates some wonderfully unexpected forms of thinking, learning, and self-reflection.

A corollary: knowledge must be produced in alternative ways through alternative channels. The Occupy movement has proliferated non-traditional instruments of knowledge production, from general assemblies and working groups, to the Occupy Library and various formal and informal counter-archives (such as the archive of

posters at <http://occuprint.org/>, to pamphlets and journals such as *Tidal* and the papers published by *N+1*. At Brooklyn College, when faculty sponsored a formal discussion of the Occupy movement, they asked student activists to stand at the front of the room and lead the conversation. At a fall 2011 teach-in, students occupied the large library auditorium and spoke in frank, personal terms about the economic, racial, and social struggles they face, while faculty listened, encouraged, asked questions. Again: official institutional patterns and power arrangements were upended as student knowledge was given space it is normally denied.

Thesis 3: educational institutions are sites of struggle. Much of the student-faculty collaboration in 2011 and 2012 at CUNY was organized around struggles at the university—against tuition hikes, against police crackdowns on student/faculty protests, against student debt, against CUNY surveillance of student groups (for a student perspective on some of these events, see the essay in this issue by Julieta Salgado). The driving force behind this movement is a commitment to *access*—to educational opportunities, to CUNY's resources, to public discourse. In dreaming of more perfect educational relations, habits, and institutions, students and faculty have developed new energy and solidarity for fighting within the highly imperfect university we inhabit, in hopes of transforming it as best we can.

We imagine wide agreement, among *Radical Teacher* readers, with our three theses, simplified thus. We will now reflect on three somewhat more complex questions that Occupy has highlighted for us.

On Teaching, Teachers, and the Power Relations of Political Education

What was, is, and might be political education in and around a movement such as Occupy? We happily concede that the very question implies distinctions between action and learning and between teacher and student that, as our theses outlined above suggest, the movement overrode from its earliest days and nights in Zuccotti Park. General assemblies, mic checks, and "horizontalist"

pedagogies all presumed collaborative learning, closely bound to practice. Learn by doing; reflect, learn, do more. Let the educator be educated. Such principles and rules of thumb have been continuously in play since the rise of 1960s movements, and are familiar to most left and feminist activists, but Occupy's embrace gave them new life, and heartened people like the editors of this journal. In this time of teaching to the test and measuring college education by its dollar benefits to individual graduates, corporate bottom lines, and gross domestic product, it has been especially refreshing to see thousands teach and learn toward democratic ends, in rebellion against the rise and rule of the 1%. We mean to enlist this issue of *Radical Teacher* in that rebellion.

But while we subscribe to Occupy's egalitarian principles of learning and doing, we are structurally teachers, nonetheless, or teachers-in-formation, or retired teachers. Inevitably, we reflect on the political and educational work of Occupy from that perspective. What was and might be taught, in Occupy and its successors? What do activists need to know? How best to build and share that knowledge? In what sites? These questions imply a crucial role for progressive educators, who bring along our experience as teachers, our time as educational activists, what we think we know about politics and history, about good movement practices, and about movement blind alleys. How can we make our experience and knowledge as activists and educators useful to groups not made up chiefly of teachers?

Walking on eggshells, we three offer these thoughts. Educators need to be educated, but we do know some things. Years of progressive politics and teaching have taught us about the risks of sentimental or utopian pedagogies--grooving in the grass, everybody gets A's, socialism in one classroom, etc.—and the greater dangers of a movement class or group being dominated by vanguards, male heavies, or just plain runny mouths. The previous 95 issues of *Radical Teacher* are a record of such risks and of strategies for combatting them. Enough said. We should share this hard-won knowledge, not surrender it. It will change as we "teach" it.

Collectively, we radical teachers also know a lot about how the social, economic, cultural, and political system works. We celebrate Occupy's tidy naming of the 1% and



PHOTO BY JULIETA SALGADO

the 99%, but the division it refers to is old knowledge for us. We have been learning and teaching about it for decades, even as our teaching failed to stop the 1% from scarfing up far more of the country's wealth than it owned back in 1967 when G. William Domhoff published *Who Rules America?* (see his excellent website for really helpful definitions, tables, charts, and other specifics), or even when whatshisname wrote *Capital*. How can we join our knowledge (and our awareness of much more to be learned) to OWS's nifty slogan, to the collective anger it helped mobilize, to what young activists who are not teachers know from their own lives and learning, and to strategies for ending rule by the wealthy? Occupy brought a hard truth into the public arena. That truth needs lots of public discussion and refinement, right down to basics such as the critical difference between wealth and income, or that between the bottom 90% of the 1% and the wealthiest few thousand families, in this society.

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OWS recognized its need for infusions of established left, feminist, anti-racist, queer, and other oppositional knowledge. Many of its speakers and workshop leaders came trailing clouds of celebrity. But it was good, wasn't it, for activists to bring perspectives of David Harvey, Naomi Klein, and the like into movement work and learning? Maybe we can kick the celebrity habit in time, or at least remain critically aware of it.

(How about a grassroots, Occupy think tank, a kind of latter-day Institute for Policy Studies, where intellectuals could work for free, building knowledge in dialogue with organizers and disturbers of the political peace?)

On "Audience"—Who Are We Trying to Teach?

Political education: what is it, in and around a movement? Leftists shy away, now, from such terms as "false consciousness," "radicalizing," even "consciousness raising." Is it only the terms that we reject, as laden with Old or New Left vanguardism? Do we want to shed the appearance of condescension while keeping the authority that goes with superior knowledge? Do we old hands in fact know more than newcomers about how power and hegemony work? Do we owe it to fellow activists, especially younger recruits, to put our experience and knowledge on offer? Questions of teacherly authority deserve serious pondering and recurrent debate.

These questions will not receive neat answers here, beyond another wave of our hands at the back issues of this journal, and the obvious point that a movement like Occupy has no single format for the exchange and building of knowledge. Between general assemblies come one-time workshops, longer-term classes, video showings, informal tabling and discussion, subgroup and committee meetings,

art and poster displays (teaching by images), music, newspaper writing and editing, the making of libraries and, yes, lectures by well-known leftists. See Jackie DiSalvo, in this issue of *Radical Teacher*, on the hundreds of educational events that erupted in, and out from, Occupy Wall St.; Joe Ramsey on Occupy Boston's educational and organizing raids on the "T"; the articles by Ira Shor and by Cathy Borck et. al., on teaching regular, for-credit, university courses about OWS, and/or on knowledge and teaching conventions developed in Zuccotti Park; Dana Blanchard's article on interactions between Occupy Oakland and teacher union struggles. Teachers have been contributing to the movement in many roles and styles. Lots to talk about, before the next regrouping.

Occupy has also taught that when we think about political education in and around a movement, we must think big. A movement can be a national or global classroom. Who would have thought, in the fall of 2011, that a year later the idea that a tiny group of Americans had made themselves rich, powerful, and menacing would be ubiquitous in media? That the question of whether there is class warfare in the United States would be hotly debated? That the year 2012 would end with two months of noisy (if not very illuminating) combat over the determination of President Obama and the Democrats to tax rich people a bit more? Occupy deserves major credit for putting inequality in the midst of political debate and conflict.

This was not just a matter of demonstrators getting attention from mainstream media, but of reframing their stories, accomplishing a good deal more than the old Students for a Democratic Society's motto claimed: "We made the news today, Oh boy." If Occupy grows and morphs into a permanent, egalitarian movement, it will do so in part by educating the media, and through media, the whole conscious public. Of course that education will be painful, let us hope, and fiercely contested, since if it happens it will mean the dismantling of dominant ideology. Teachers and everyone else in such a movement would need to be smart and honest about the possibilities of such an educational project. For example, it is great when Charlie Rose invites David Harvey, Rick Wolff, and David Graeber onto his show (Graeber didn't make it). And in media a bit farther from the mainstream, it is great that Rick Wolff—a *Radical Teacher* author, by the way—has a weekly program ("Economic Update," Saturday 12:00-1:00) on New York's WBAI, which also airs "Occupy Wall St. Radio" each weekday from 6:30 to 7:00 pm. When the day comes that "our" intellectuals and pundits appear regularly on the Sunday morning, TV network talk shows, we will need to strategize better and more ingeniously than our marginal position has required up to now. New media may be more important than CNN; we three are not the right people to set an agenda for that workshop.

On "Teaching" History

As suggested by Jackie DiSalvo in this issue of *Radical Teacher*, high on the list of educational needs, within whatever political movement succeeds Occupy, will be the need for (take a breath) history. Who can be against that?

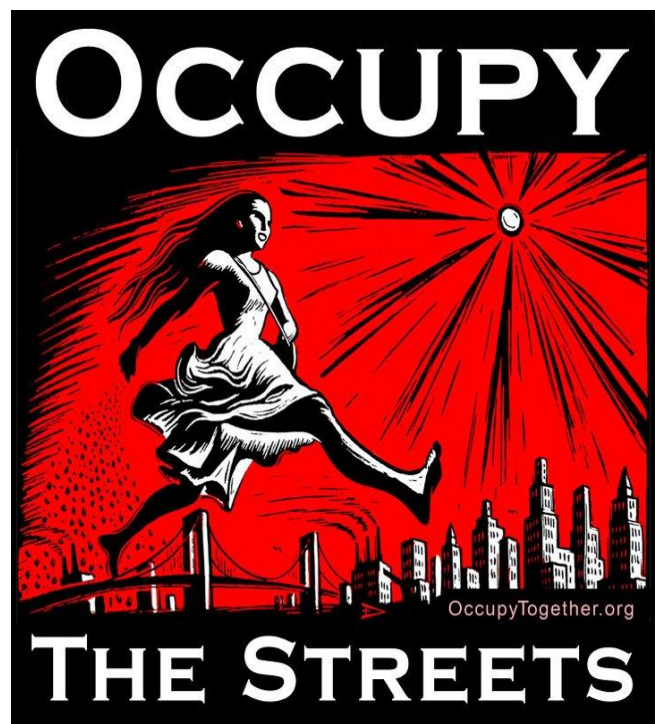
But the challenges are daunting. In this context "history" means a number of very different things. To name just three, first there is history as practical lessons: more-radical-than-thou face-offs are poison; the police are not trying to help us; living the revolution as if it had already happened is a fine idea, but within limits; and so on. Second, there is history as serious knowledge of resistance, rebellion, and social transformation—not as potted "background" or as inspirational tales, but as a shared awareness laced right into meetings, publicity, actions. And third there is history as big stories—not necessarily the master narrative of Marxism, but guiding stories of what happened over time: for one huge example, the story of how 60s and 70s movements were tamed into entitlements and identity politics, with conscious class struggle then chiefly relegated to the conservative foundations and organizing strategies that have made capitalist politics the cesspool they are today. Building historical consciousness into the next Occupy will surely be tough, not a matter of quick briefings or timeouts for crit-self-crit.

To make things tougher, our history must also be a provisional story of the future. Are we living in a civilization blindly heading toward collapse—unsustainable empire, resource wars, environmental disaster, barbarism, and so on? Plausible enough scenarios, these days. Or does the social order of the 1% hang together via some combination of ideology, technological tricks, fascist oppression, and regimes of total surveillance? Practical organizers may say, in effect, let us fight today's battle, undistracted by such nightmares. They have a point. So do the narrators of disaster. It is hard to see how life in 2030 could be like life in 1990. Occupy 2013 would be unwise to imagine a modest redistribution of wealth and power as returning history to an old normal.

Since late 2011, the encampments at Zucotti Park and elsewhere around the country have been shut down by agents of state repression, often with unapologetic brutality. Confronted by a vibrant, creative, and expanding challenge to expectations about what constitutes public space, who can claim it, and how it might be used, political and economic elites responded with blunt force. In cities around the nation—from New York to Oakland—police arrested occupiers, tore down tents and tarps, confiscated (and in some instances discarded) books, signs, and other materials. Yet Occupy continues to grow and evolve, changing shape to meet new conditions. Occupy has taken root in the cracks, spreading into new areas, taking new forms, including: the anti-student debt, Strike Debt, and Rolling Jubilee campaigns; the occupation of foreclosed homes; a range of environmental justice actions; and

Occupy Sandy, an impressive mutual aid and community organizing program established in the wake of the hurricane that devastated areas of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut in late 2012. These are just a few of the many diverse campaigns that Occupy has sprouted and nurtured—campaigns that demonstrate the movement's flexibility, variety, and ongoing influence (for more information, see: <http://occupywallst.org/>). And even on the nation's central political stage, the movement's influence is hard to deny: Barack Obama defeated Mitt Romney by running on an Occupy-inflected platform, condemning the Bain Capital titan as a self-serving member of and advocate for the 1%. We hope that Occupy will continue to develop and grow, and that its radical, egalitarian, antiauthoritarian principles will reverberate in our communities, on our campuses, in our classrooms, and beyond. And we hope that this issue of *Radical Teacher* will play a role in expanding and deepening the continuing conversation about Occupy, education, and the struggle for social and political justice.

We invite responses to articles that follow: go to <http://radicalteacherblog.wordpress.com> and talk with us on the *Radical Teacher* blog. If you have a comment you would like us to consider for the next issue of RT, email JEntin@brooklyn.cuny.edu, susanomalley4@gmail.com, or richardohmann@earthlink.net.



OCCUPY POSTER BY ERIC DROOKER



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