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# Radical Student Activism in the 1930s and its Comparison to Student Activism during Occupy Wall Street

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*A Brief Historiography of Student Activism 1930-1939 in Correlation with Student Activism post-Great Recession with Specific Concentration on Involvement with Occupy Wall Street*

*By Andrew Pierce*

## **Introduction:**

During times of economic crisis, what political, social, and economic philosophies have students aligned themselves with in order to propose solutions to the real economic problems in their world? The United States may be a country founded on principles of democracy and republicanism, but students in universities across the nation have aligned themselves, historically, with some heterodox philosophies over the years. Whether it was Communism or Socialism in the 1930's, or left libertarianism and direct democracy during the recent Occupy protests, students have long considered whether the policies of the United States government were really working in their best interests.

This paper's objective is to explore the connections between radical, left-leaning student activism in early 1930's New York and the student activists who have come out in support of Occupy Wall Street. This is important because Occupy Wall Street is a movement unlike anything our country has ever seen. Massive sit-in protests in Zucotti park, where people from across the region stood together united by their cause: putting to an end economic inequality and stopping the United States government from continually propagating a pro-corporate agenda while Main Street and the 99% are left footing the bill. It is important for us to understand that, while Occupy Wall Street is a unique movement, it is not the first time people united firmly against their country to protest its policies.

The student activists of the early 1930s formed leagues that stood in opposition to the democratic foundations of the United States. These activists were communists and socialists, sons and daughters struck as hard by the depression as anyone. They formed leagues which organized protests and demonstrations, distributed literature and flyers, and recruited new

students regularly to sway popular opinion within their colleges. Not unlike Occupy Wall Street, the student activists were concerned with economic inequality among most other issues, but they were also as concerned about global peace as well. It has yet to be seen how far Occupy Wall Street will go to foster global peace, but the support of energy independence appears to be the new fight for global peace.

Difficulties can arise when stretching the scope of the work too far. Occupy Wall Street is a new movement and it is still active today, engaging in new crises as they arise. Student activism is a broad subject in its own right, and student activism concerning the economic justice makes up a large part of that subject. In my attempts to narrow down the scope of this project, I have determined that in order to properly make comparisons between Occupy Wall Street and the student activists of the Depression era, I would have to limit my scope both geographically and chronologically. This paper will strictly focus on student activists at CCNY from 1929-1935 with particular interest in the period of 1929-1933. This is largely due to the relevancies which, on its face, appear to exist between the economic statuses of the time. As for Occupy Wall Street, social media and the internet has made it so that a large number of people are able to organize rather quickly with a group tweet, a group Facebook message, or a mass text. This has led to the genesis of the occupied campus phenomenon. Occupied campuses in New York will be of particular interest because of both their geographical consistency with the first part of my project, but also the level of participation is much greater on New York City campuses. Given their proximity to Occupy Wall Street, Occupy CCNY and New York Students Rising have become prominent members of the Occupy community.

In all, this paper will seek to point out the similarities and differences between the student groups who responded to financial crises that were beyond crippling. This paper will begin with

an exploration of the student groups who were most active and prominent during the early 1930s, it will then move to an exploration of Occupy Wall Street in general, followed by an exploration of the student involvement in Occupy, and it will conclude by examining the evidence found in the exploration of each subject, potentially answering the question posed in my opening statement. So first, we move to the student activists of the early 1930s.

### **Section I: Leftist Activist Student Groups of the early 1930s**

There were a number of groups formed by students on campuses across the nation. This paper focuses on three of the major student organizations that believed far left solutions to market capitalism were the most effective countermeasures to the Great Depression. Each group had specific political philosophic solutions that were in line with the overall philosophy of the political institutions they supported. For example, the National Student League (NSL) was a socialist student group that supported labor unionization through peaceful demonstrations. They were strongly anti-capitalist and made a name for themselves by supporting the Harlan county miners strike of 1932<sup>1</sup>. Other student groups such as the Young Communist League (YCL) and the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) were also major student organizations that brought Leftist politics to campuses.

The NSL was the preeminent Leftist student group of the era. The group was formed on the campus of CCNY after the CCNY president, Frederick C. Robinson, suppressed an issue of *Frontiers* magazine that had published an anti-war, specifically an anti-Military Science training, editorial. The issue in question had called the Military Science program an “agency for the

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, 1993

dissemination of jingoist, imperialist propaganda.”<sup>2</sup> Students rallied around the on-campus censorship and eventually formed the New York Student League. The New York Student League eventually found its popularity growing, and over the winter of 1931 altered its goals and realized new aspirations becoming the National Student League.<sup>3</sup> However, CCNY was home to more than just one Leftist student group.

The Young Communist League was an arm of the American Communist Party aimed at recruiting pro-Communist students in high school and on college campuses. Originally, the YCL did not view college campuses as an ideal recruiting arena. They felt that there was a bourgeois elitism that existed amongst college students.<sup>4</sup> However, once the Depression struck, college campuses became fertile grounds for recruiting young people into the party’s ranks. The YCL and the NSL were inextricably linked in the early 1930s. There were tensions between the more socialist members of the NSL and the more communist members of the YCL, however they shared similar sentiments when it came to what were important issues for the students.

The last student group that will be discussed is the Student League for Industrial Democracy. The SLID has an odd, but extensive history. Originally founded as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society by Upton Sinclair (among others) in 1905, it changed its name to the League for Industrial Democracy in 1921. It did not begin as a dedicated student group. Instead, it was a Leftist political organization which maintained a presence on college campuses. However, even though it represented the only Leftist political organization available to students throughout the 1920s, it was weak and ineffective. The LID did not put a strong emphasis on student recruiting on campus, instead holding study groups to talk about the issues of the day and

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, 1993

discussing possible socialist solutions. It was a group that intended to foster progressive thought instead of progressive action. This changed once the Great Depression occurred.

In 1932, students who had affiliated themselves with the LID held a national convention ending the Intercollegiate Student Council of the LID. They elected new officials to lead their group in organizing protests and demonstrations. The SLID was focused on a number of key issues in Depression-era America. In their publication, *Revolt*, they explicated in the December 1932 issue why students were searching for Leftist alternatives to traditional American capitalism.<sup>5</sup> In an editorial entitled “Why Students are Turning to Socialism”, the SLID claimed it was due to a decline in family income, decreased student budgets, a loss of summer jobs which they relied on to pay for college and to have spending money during the academic year, increases in tuition, the lack of potential job opportunities once a student has graduated, and the sacrifice of a college education not being worth the reward.<sup>6</sup> The SLID, like their NSL counterparts, found in the economic crisis an opportunity to affect change in a world. It was change they saw fit and believed was needed.

These three student groups were major players on campuses, but most importantly at CCNY. On campus, they protested unfair treatment of students and teachers who did not support the capitalist regime, they argued against American imperialism, and they prescribed collective, largely socialist and communist, solutions to the failures of capitalism in the United States. They represented student interests more effectively than many other student groups that formed at this time. They also stand as the most influential student groups of the era. Next, we will look at the key issues that were at the core of these groups’ philosophies.

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<sup>5</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>6</sup> *Revolt*, December 1932 issue

## **Section II: Key Issues of the Leftist student groups of the early 1930s**

The causes of the Great Depression are still actively debated to this day. Proponents of competing schools of thought, economists, and political scientists have all offered different perspectives on the foremost causes of the Great Depression, but there has been overlap allowing us to infer as to what the foremost causes were. First, there was the stock market crash of 1929. A massive bubble had formed over the course of the 1920s and eventually this bubble burst, leading to a sharp decline in stock prices. Secondly, there was stark wealth inequality. The richest one percent owned more than thirty-three percent of American assets and hardly reinvested the money. Finally, there was little to no regulation on banks when it came to speculation. Without regulation, risky speculation was almost assured leading to many Americans losing their money in virtually one fell swoop.<sup>7</sup>

The stock market crash of 1929 was a result of soaring stock prices occurring during the 1920s. By October of 1929, stock prices had quadrupled in less than ten years. This led to stocks being viewed as a “sure thing.” Once the bubble had reached its limit, it burst causing stock prices to drop by nearly eighty percent by 1933. Once stock prices had fallen, investment declined greatly as few people felt confident purchasing stock in companies. This further reinforced the economic downturn and led to sharp decreases in consumption, an economic factor closely linked to investment.

Another major factor considered a direct cause of the Great Depression was the stark wealth inequality in America. While corporate profits were on the rise, wage earners only saw

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<sup>7</sup> *The great depression*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/us/48.asp>



incremental growth in their earnings. Eventually, over thirty-three percent of all assets in America were controlled by the top one-percent of earners. The one-percent was not inclined and had little incentive to reinvest their earnings and so they did not. This meant that money that would have factored into consumption was now being held and factoring at a zero point economically. While this was occurring, wage earners were stretching themselves thin through larger purchases made through installment plans (automobiles, appliances, etc.).

Finally, American savings were being held in banks that profit from stock market speculation. In the 1920s, financial regulations on speculation by banks were all but non-existent. Banks and the investors they lent money to were free to speculate on any and all stocks available. This amounted to unregulated “betting” but it was all house money backed by the American people. Once stock prices began to fall, the unregulated speculation had disastrous effects. There were no protections in place on the money that people had saved and as a result, most Americans saw their hard-earned savings dwindle.

During the 1920s, college campuses were filled mostly with students from white-collar families. This led to the dominance of conservative ideology on campus. After the Great Depression, the bourgeois collegiate culture was challenged by a more progressive politic.<sup>8</sup> The largely Republican constituency that existed on college campuses was replaced by a more powerful Leftist constituency which sought radical change to the business-as-usual, reactionary politics of the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> Herbert Hoover, POTUS during the Great Depression, enacted failed policy after failed policy in an attempt to quell the rapidly developing deluge of systemic

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 1993

collapse that resulted in the Great Depression. Student organizations took notice and platformed on the promise of new solutions for a new economy.

Each student organization had a specific quarrel with capitalism. The Student League for Industrial Democracy held that it was due to the failed capitalist policies that middle class and low-income families were suffering as a result of the Great Depression. The SLID challenged the narrow-mindedness of traditional, right-wing college students. Because of the Great Depression, they were allowed to prescribe radical, leftist solutions to the problem of American capitalism, mainly a change to Socialism. The SLID stated its goal to be the establishment of "a classless cooperative society in which men will have an equal opportunity to achieve the good things of life."<sup>10</sup> As part of this strategy, the SLID aligned itself with the National Student League and its core tenets. The SLID was firmly pro-Labor, it fought for free speech protection on campus, and it was avowedly anti-war.

The SLID's socialist prescriptions rose out of a first-hand experience with capitalism's failure. Having been born early enough in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to witness the booming economy of the 1920s, undergraduate SLIDers witnessed capitalism's capriciousness firsthand. SLIDers, whose families had once been the beneficiaries of the Roaring '20s, watched as the people around them became cash-strapped and/or impoverished by the Depression. This allowed the SLID to prescribe Socialism as a viable alternative. Because the SLID was led by individuals indoctrinated in Marxist ideology, they were able to harness the idea that "economics is the driving force of history"<sup>11</sup> and turn it into a rallying cry for student activism.

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<sup>10</sup> The League for Industrial Democracy, *New York Students in Revolt: The Story of the Intercollegiate League for Industrial Democracy, 1933*, pg. 6

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, 1993

The National Student League held similar views to the SLID, but they differed on some issues that they felt were integral to their platform. For one, the NSL was of the opinion that American capitalism was an “oppressive class system held together by violence” and they believed that “fascistic employers would stop at nothing in their drive to thwart unionization.”<sup>12</sup> In a reprint of the *Student Review*, a magazine distributed by the NSL, Joseph Clark described the NSL’s core demands ambitious, yet practical.<sup>13</sup> Amongst the core demands of the NSL were: unemployment insurance for idle graduates; state aid to needy collegians (funded by taxation on the rich); increased appropriations for public colleges; and the end of censorship of student publications, as well as the permitting of students to choose which political organizations they affiliated with, regardless of political philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Much like the SLID, the NSL believed that students deserved to freely express their political opinions, even if their opinion was of an anti-American, anti-capitalism tilt.

The NSL, much like the SLID, rallied around the notion that “economics was the driving force in history.” The Communist NSLers were as much influenced by Marxist ideology as any other student group. The NSL understood that capitalism needed to maintain a basically educated workforce; it needed to buttress itself against worker revolution; and it needed to stifle freedom of thought on campus in order to maintain a steady flow of workers. With this understanding, the NSL outlined specific, Communist-influenced principles in order to combat capitalism.<sup>15</sup> These principles addressed the specific issues capitalism had inflicted upon the American population. They included: solidarity with the working class, freedom of student thought and action, and free education, among others. By addressing problems such as these, the

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<sup>12</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>13</sup> Clark, Greenwood Press, 1968

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>15</sup> Building a Militant Student Movement: Program of the National Student League, 1934

NSL could “militarize” a student movement around the idea that a communistic, classless society was preferable to the fickle capitalist society which had failed them and their families.

The Young Communist League was the youth arm of the Communist Party (CP) in America. Its aim was to recruit Left-leaning students on college campuses and in high schools. The college campuses were really key because they were new and fertile grounds for the Communists. They attracted students with pro-Soviet and anti-capitalism ideology. On the CCNY campus, they worked as partners with the National Student League, promoting membership so it might be strengthened.<sup>16</sup> The YCL was the least active as a standalone group, but as a contingent within the NSL, the YCL steered the direction of pro-Student policies on campus. They fought for the same on-campus changes, albeit with more charged and disparaging rhetoric.

The YCL’s understanding of capitalism was very much in line with the understanding of the Communist Party of America. That being said, the YCL was much more focused on the day-to-day struggle of the student, the worker, the farmer, and the intellectual than it was on a revolutionary overthrow of the system. The YCL understood that capitalism needed to be picked apart from within and not blown up all at once. In the *Red Menace*, the YCL notes that:

*“It is in the small everyday struggles, that we learn how to fight against the whole system.”*

YCLers would have to buy into this message in order to join because this was the central theme of YCL activism at CCNY.

Another, undated, example of YCL understanding can be found in a pamphlet issued by group leadership at CCNY. In the pamphlet, the YCL points out:

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<sup>16</sup> Ed Ward, *The Red Menace*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934

*“The process of fascization in the United States appears more openly in the policies of the extreme Right fascist and semi-fascist representatives of finance capital, the Republican Party, the Liberty League, etc. Against these we must carry on an intense campaign. And in doing so it is necessary to show the class kinship of Roosevelt’s policy with the policy of his opponents from the Right, explaining to the masses that Roosevelt with the New Deal and NRA policy does not embarrass or hinder the carrying out of the policy of finance capital, of Wall Street, but, on the contrary, resorting to more skillful methods, rather makes easier the carrying out of this policy.”<sup>17</sup>*

YCL distrust of New Deal policies should come as no surprise. The YCL believed the New Deal was ineffective and did not address worker struggle in the right way. It was also a widely held belief, amongst the student groups at least, that the New Deal was propping up a dead system and/or creating a fascistic wedge at the highest level of government.

Overlap in the issues that were of the utmost concern for these Leftist student groups is to be expected. Regardless of their political leanings (or lack thereof), these student groups were able to garner much support in their fight for change on-campus, in society, and in government. They expressed strong anti-capitalism sentiment and saw American capitalism as being violent and imperialist. Each group viewed the alternatives (i.e., Socialism, Communism, etc.) as meritorious and believed that their group would be the one to lead the charge. They fought for change where they saw a broken system failing society in general. And they took that to anyone and to anywhere.

### **Section III: Demonstrations in the Name of Progressivism**

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<sup>17</sup> Taken from a pamphlet found in Box 1 of 2 on the YCL donated anonymously. No author, part of a pamphlet issued by the YCL.

Each student organization (the SLID, NSL, and YCL) attempted to publicize their struggle for change. It is one thing to start student magazines or papers in an attempt to have your message heard, but it is another to fight on the front lines of change. The NSL fought from the very beginning; they were an organization borne out of the struggle for anti-censorship on the CCNY campus.<sup>18</sup> The YCL were the most radical activists, assisting in workers strikes on the CCNY campus, most notably the Vitamin Strike where cafeteria workers won better living conditions, higher wages, shorter hours, and union recognition.<sup>19</sup> The Student League for Industrial Democracy was a strong Leftist group which was capable of organizing large groups of students, especially for anti-war demonstrations. Each group protested / demonstrated in solidarity with groups that supported or were in agreement their core beliefs. This section examines some of the demonstrations by the NSL, YCL, and student demonstrations in line with the core principles of the NSL, YCL, and SLID.

The most prominent demonstration by the National Student League was the Harlan expedition. An incident which garnered national attention in 1932, students from the NSL at CCNY organized a trip to Harlan county Kentucky, bringing with them food and clothing for coal miners who were striking.<sup>20</sup> The goals of the NSL in this demonstration were two-fold: 1) to provide humanitarian aid to the striking miners; 2) to raise the political consciousness of undergraduates.<sup>21</sup> Strikers were reportedly being brutally attacked by police officers and vigilantes who did not support their unionization. In leading the expedition and investigating these charges, the NSL hoped to show the more nefarious aspects of capitalism. Unfortunately,

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>19</sup> *The Red Menace*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, 1993

the NSL experienced logistical problems and were, at the very least, verbally harassed by Harlan county residents, the district attorney, and the sheriff.<sup>22</sup>

The Harlan county expedition was one of the first political demonstrations organized by the NSL. As a new student group, they were not well funded and were incapable of providing financial support for the eighty students who wished to make the trip. Each student who signed on to the expedition needed to pay for the trip out of pocket, all other costs (including the costs of aid for the miners) came through fundraising.<sup>23</sup> Adding to the problem of cost was the threat of violence and forcible resistance by Harlan county residents and officers of the county. The myriad of threats, too numerous to list here, thwarted attempts by the student-led expedition to conduct their investigation as well as their relief efforts. In the end, the demonstration was largely unsuccessful on the front lines of the strike, but the political consequences were of much greater merit. Liberal politicians were now provided with ammunition to open up a congressional delegation on the matter.<sup>24</sup> Public outrage in accord with the students was equally as powerful. The *New York Herald Tribune* condemned the actions of Harlan county officers. Most notably, over three thousand students sent telegrams and letters to Harlan county expressing disgust over the treatment of the students and miners. However, the most important contribution made by the NSL was the stimulation of the student Left. Across the country, sparked by the bravery of the NSL students who partook in the expedition, radical groups began to form and militantly protest in favor of Labor.<sup>25</sup> For the first time in history, the student Left was now a political force that had to be recognized.

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<sup>22</sup> Haas, 2011

<sup>23</sup> Haas, 2011

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>25</sup> Cohen, 1993

The Young Communist League, a significantly more radical group of student activists, was less active as a standalone group. While they worked to support unemployed workers and rallied against the ills of capitalism, they were usually doing so as an ancillary to the Communist Party of America. The CP would organize the protests and demonstrations and the YCLer's would show up and recruit younger people interested in the protest.<sup>26</sup> The most noteworthy demonstration of support by the YCL occurred in 1934 when the YCL supported the workers of Vitamin cafeteria in organizing and becoming a union shop.<sup>27</sup>

The YCL, which was staunchly pro-labor / anti-capitalist, supported the workers at the Vitamin cafeteria in fighting for better living conditions, higher wages, shorter hours, and union recognition. They were opposed by the owners of the business, anti-communist and anti-union residents / students, and by local police. However, in the face of the adversity, they successfully rallied to win for what they were fighting. As noted in the *Red Menace*, an YCL publication, their battle was not just for the workers. They were actively working to fight against the ills of capitalism, writing in the paper:

*“...we understand that the only ultimate, real, and basic solution of our problem is in the complete destruction of the capitalist system...”*

Successful support of the unionization of workers, especially on campus, only enhanced the position and the prestige of the YCL.

The YCL was much more narrowly focused than the much more ambitious student groups, the Student League for Industrial Democracy and the National Student League. The goal

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<sup>26</sup> Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session *Investigation of Communist Activities in the State of Michigan*

<sup>27</sup> *The Red Menace*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934



of the YCL was to promote hardline communism both on-campus and from within other student groups. According to James Wechsler in one such example of this:

*“The communists had stationed me in the ASU on the assumption that I would zealously carry on the communist line there. But I soon found myself far more interested in promoting the Popular Front idea than in performing factional communist assignments. I was sure Joe Lash and I could prove something to the world by working together harmoniously. He felt the same way about it.”<sup>28</sup>*

By all accounts, the on-campus mouthpiece that was the YCL appeared more concerned with how other communist organizations were run and how non-communist, but still Leftist, organizations were operating on campus. The YCL bred more intolerance amongst Leftist student groups than the NSL or the SLID. However, they still echoed the anti-capitalist sentiment of both the NSL and SLID, regardless of their mistrust of these groups.

The Student League for Industrial Democracy was most famous for its anti-war protests. However, these protests were not simply anti-war. The SLID was anti-war in the same way that we will later see Occupy Wall Street is anti-war. As outlined in their student handbook, the SLID claims that war is an “aspect of capitalist expansion and rivalry.”<sup>29</sup> The SLID held that “bourgeois democracy” was no different from the social stratification witnessed in fascism. As a result, the SLID organized boycotts and demonstrations, the intent being to radicalize students and have them join organizations, such as the SLID, in order to further propagate anti-Fascism and anti-war sentiment on-campus.

The most notable anti-war demonstration orchestrated by the SLID was the National Student Strike Against War. Occurring in successive years (1934 and 1935), the SLID worked

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<sup>28</sup> Cohen, 1993; From Wechsler, *The Age of Suspicion*

<sup>29</sup> Handbook of the Student League for Industrial Democracy History Program and Organizational Guide

in tandem with NSL to amass more than 15,000 students in New York City alone, 800 on the CCNY campus. The peaceful demonstration was in commemoration of the United States entry into World War I. The second strike, in 1935, amassed more students nationwide, but around the same number in New York City. The demonstrations represented the largest anti-war protests of the early 1930s. They were also the most successful in that they elevated the NSL and the SLID to such heights of popularity that, in 1935, the two student organizations merged, forming the American Student Union (ASU). The anti-capitalist sentiment that existed in the background of the anti-Fascist, anti-war demonstrations during this era is echoed in Joseph P. Lash's "Footnote to the Oxford Pledge" (1938). In it, Lash states:

*"Our geographical isolation makes political isolation seem practical. And we have 1917 on our conscience. We went to war ostensibly to make the world safe for democracy, only to make it safe for J.P. Morgan. We don't want to be fooled again. "*

Remarks such as this coming from a prominent member of the SLID and the once Head of the ASU go a long way in demonstrating the strong anti-capitalist slant that the SLID rallied around. Much like Occupy Wall Street, the failure of capitalism was the spark that set the machine into motion, and eventual demonstrations calling for systemic change were the byproduct.

## **Section I: Key Issues of the Occupy Wall Street Movement**

Occupy Wall Street is a movement of the people, its intentions made clear when they first occupied Zucotti Park. On September 29, 2011, the General Assembly issued the following declaration:

*“As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies.*

*As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known<sup>30</sup>.”*

This is only the opening statement of the declaration<sup>31</sup> and what follows is a list of key issues that OWS considers paramount in shifting the paradigm towards a more ethical society. Several of the key issues that OWS considers paramount are similar to the key issues of the student activists during the Depression Era. However, OWS does not hold in common all of the issues that faced Depression Era activists. Several of the issues that OWS raised are reflections of the large generational gap between their movement and the activism in the Depression Era.

Occupy Wall Street’s key issues as outlined in their declaration are as follows:

- 1) Changing the hegemonic economic philosophy from one that stratifies society into one which unifies and strengthens society
- 2) Accountability of all institutions of power, both politically and economically
- 3) Liberation of the flow of information
- 4) Stopping institutions of debt (banks and other financial institutions) from saddling individuals with debt that could never be repaid in a reasonable amount of time
  - a. Bad mortgages
  - b. Student loans
  - c. Credit cards

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<sup>30</sup> General Assembly, 2011

<sup>31</sup> The remainder of the declaration can be found here: <http://occupywallst.org/forum/first-official-release-from-occupy-wall-street/>

- 5) Moving the country forward towards alternative energy in an effort to combat climate change
- 6) Eliminate the outsourcing of jobs and combat unemployment. In general, keep the jobs within the United States rather than sending them overseas and using cheap labor.
- 7) Strengthen existing and create new social programs such as universal healthcare and a better pension system
- 8) Fair working wage
- 9) Remove the money from politics
- 10) Halt American imperialist doctrine

The issues outlined above are just 10 of countless issues raised by the Occupy Wall Street movement.

OWS is a response to the growing number of social and economic problems generated by the political system. Decades of neo-conservative imperialism and the dominant neoliberal economic doctrine sowed the seeds of social unrest as Americans watched their jobs get shipped overseas and their country wage wars in the name of democracy, thousands of men and women sacrificing their lives for a cause that only served to put money in the pockets of politicians. OWS stands as the symbol of a society desperate for change. They stand for resistance against the status quo.

## **Section II: The Cognitive Divide**

“We are the 99%!” The proclamation of Occupy Wall Street that they are the representatives of those who felt that their lives were no longer of import within the United States, rang loudly and its impact is felt still today. The self-proclaimed 99% are the people who can be found on the bottom rungs of income distribution. A growing trend that began in the 1970’s, wage stagnation led to increasing income inequality in the United States.<sup>32</sup> While this wage stagnation was occurring amongst the wage laborers, corporations began to see an increase

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<sup>32</sup> <http://rdwolff.com/content/income-inequality>

in revenues. Eventually, the gap had widened so much that we ended with the income distribution found in the table below:

Table 1

Wealth or income class Mean household income	Income, net worth, and financial worth in the U.S. by percentile (2010 dollars)	Mean household net worth	Mean household financial (non-home) wealth
Top 1 percent	\$1,318,200	\$16,439,400	\$15,171,600
Top 20 percent	\$226,200	\$2,061,600	\$1,719,800
60th-80th percentile	\$72,000	\$216,900	\$100,700
40th-60th percentile	\$41,700	\$61,000	\$12,200
Bottom 40 percent	\$17,300	-\$10,600	-\$14,800

\*From Wolff (2012); only mean figures are available, not medians. Note that income and wealth are separate measures; so, for example, the top 1% of income-earners is not exactly the same group of people as the top 1% of wealth-holders, although there is considerable overlap.

Such wealth inequality naturally causes a cognitive dissonance between the top 1 percent of earners and the remaining 99%. As the income gap increased, the cognitive dissonance grew and unrest turned into occupation.

Occupy Wall Street is the culmination of years of exclusionary financial practices, its intent to narrow the gap, and to revolutionize and revamp democracy in the United States. Its global aspirations aside, OWS challenges the power structure as it exists in today's United States. OWS is not a movement aligned with any particular party. Many have called them liberals<sup>33</sup> or anarchists but this is not, in any true sense, what OWS sees itself as. Rather, Occupy considers itself a movement that embraces collective solutions and engages in participatory democracy<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Nation, 2011

<sup>34</sup> Statement of Autonomy, Occupy Wall Street

### **Section III: Collective Solutions to the Failures of Market Capitalism**

In the year 2006, housing prices reached unprecedented levels signaling to some economists that the bubble was about to burst. The following year, the United States experienced a massive financial crisis that crippled the banking industry. As a result of the “too-big-to-fail” doctrine, the United States government approved bailouts of failing banks and automobile manufacturers. Just two of the bailouts approved<sup>35</sup> totaled 1.1 trillion dollars according to the New York Times<sup>36</sup>. While homes were just beginning to be foreclosed on en masse, and unemployment was just beginning to approach double-digit levels, banks who engaged in predatory practices, excessive risk-taking, and rent-seeking behavior were being rewarded for their moral deprivations<sup>37</sup> with large sums of money. The message had been sent by the United States government: we will not let the industry fail because of poor decision-making.

Occupy Wall Street, as can be found in Section 2, wants to change the system. The banking industry had caused so much harm to the ninety-nine percenters that they rallied together to show the world that solutions could come out of their participatory democracy. These collective solutions would work to destroy inequality and stop the banking industry from taking advantage of the people. The solutions proposed by the occupiers and individuals that aligned themselves with the movement take many forms since Occupy is not a movement with any specific political affiliation. There are solutions ranging from a fair tax system<sup>38</sup> that calls for citizens to protest unfair taxation, call for the close of overseas tax havens, and support a

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<sup>35</sup> TARP and Fannie Mae / Freddie Mac

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/02/04/business/20090205-bailout-totals-graphic.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/02/04/business/20090205-bailout-totals-graphic.html?_r=0)

<sup>37</sup> Stiglitz, 2012

<sup>38</sup> Collins, 2010

financial speculation tax, to green public works programs that would both move us towards energy independence and create jobs<sup>3940</sup>.

Occupy Wall Street has concerned itself with making sure that the solutions they develop are beneficial for the whole of humanity. The people involved in OWS are demanding justice where they see persisting injustice. By looking at a solution created by an individual aligned with OWS, we can find all of its core tenets (solidarity and democracy) deeply rooted in the solution.

Chuck Collins proposed a fair tax system<sup>41</sup> as a means of eliminating some of the inequality that Occupy seeks to destroy. Collins feels that the problem in taxation is systemic and, therefore, needs to be revamped in order to stop corporations from taking advantage of tax havens and marginalizing taxes paid within the United States. However, the problem is not just with the corporations who avoid paying domestic taxes, but also with tax rates on the top 1% of earners. In order to fix the systemic issue in taxation, Collins proposes that we, as a united citizenry, protest unfair taxation, call for the close of overseas tax havens, and support a financial speculation tax. The key to all of this is that we work together to see the end result in the United States.

Aside from a fair tax system, OWS has called for massive systemic change. From the outset, OWS has demanded a number of changes and has solutions to offer. For income distribution, we have the fair tax system outlined above. In calling for an end to the influence of corporations on politics<sup>42</sup>, OWS and affiliated groups have demanded that the Citizens United

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<sup>39</sup> Wolff / Barsamian, 2012

<sup>40</sup> Van Gelder / Pibel, 2012

<sup>41</sup> Collins, 2010

<sup>42</sup> In Economics, this is known as regulatory capture

ruling be overturned and corporate personhood be constitutionally banned. Solutions to high unemployment and economic inequality have varied but are strictly anti-capitalist: redistribute the wealth equally and fairly; increase the minimum wage; increased access to quality education; and determined action to sustain domestic demand during severe economic downturns.<sup>43</sup> OWS, demonstrating the strong student contingent forming its base membership, has also concerned itself with student loan debt. OWS has proposed student loan forgiveness programs that would not only alleviate students saddled with incredible amounts of debt but would also serve as foundation programs in increasing the access to quality education across the country.

Although never aligning themselves with any specific political party, the Occupy movement has a markedly liberal, even Leftist to some extent. Given their direct democratic approach and their radical solutions to the failures of market capitalism, Occupy has firmly placed itself outside of the Left in American politics and its demonstrations keep it in that political niche. In the next section, different direct action approaches of Occupy will be explored in detail.

#### **Section IV: How Students Have Aligned Themselves With the Occupy Movement**

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Wolf, *Reforming Western Capitalism*



OWS's direct action approach has drawn criticism but cannot be belied its effectiveness. A quick trip to the OWS website<sup>44</sup> will provide you with all the information you need on what is going on with OWS and its partner organizations. Occupy has shown solidarity with a number of student-led coalitions and students have responded in a number of different ways. While most students have concerned themselves with the student debt movement, some are protesting the ills of global capitalism. Movements such as Occupy Student Debt and OccupyColleges are meritorious and deserve further historical explanation, but their actions do not fit into the scope of this paper. The direct action protest that needs to be explored is the Student Week of Action, a protest by New York City public and private university students in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street.

Student occupiers, inspired by the initial occupation of Zucotti Park, resorted to more tradition tactics at first. If there was going to be a movement, there first needed to be information dissemination. One successful disseminator of information was the Occupy Colleges group. Occupy Colleges used similar methodology as the original student arm of the LID. They staged teach-ins intended to demonstrate both the failures of capitalism on all fronts, especially its student letdown, and what students could do in order to work against the system in an effort to change it. There can be no question that the teach-ins run by students in the Occupy era were much more effective than those run in the 1930s.

The reason teach-ins were more effective today than they were 80 years ago is not intuitive. In an age where access to information is much simpler and more streamlined, it is also significantly more difficult to differentiate between accurate, somewhat accurate, and inaccurate information. Media bias, activist bias, and information overload are contributing factors to this

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<sup>44</sup> <http://occupywallst.org>

problem. In the 1930s, student teach-ins and discussion groups (similar to the GA's run by Occupy and its affiliated groups) were ineffective because there was too little national exposure. Without the information pipeline we have today, students relied on less dispersive means of information sharing. In order to use the method as both an information disseminator and a recruitment tool, student activists would propagandize and use hyperbolic statements in their media. This method was significantly more effective than running teach-ins and discussion groups. Therefore, the argument is that teach-ins are much more effective today.

The most compelling arguments that arose from today's teach-ins and discussion groups commented on specific systemic problems of capitalism. Students involved in the Occupy movement accepted the same core principles of Occupy and shared its concerns with capitalism. The students held that occupier problems were their own problems; these included national corporatization, greed and overt risky behavior by the banks, racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequality, and high debt burdens being thrust upon students. According to Occupy StudentDebt, another student affiliation in the Occupy movement, the debt burden could be directly attributed to the banks. As they stated in their goals to end the student debt burden:

***"2. Jobs. Jobs. Jobs.***

***53% of new graduates are currently facing unemployment or underemployment. We need steady jobs that pay fair living wages - it is not "entitled" to want the economic security and mobility that previous generations of Americans were able to take for granted.***

***Student debtors want the same steps to the American Dream as anyone else: the ability to buy or rent places to live in our own names, marry who we love, start families, and perhaps start businesses.***

***The financially crippling aftermath of predatory lending holds millions individuals and families back from possibly ever achieving these goals - a shame, because they would all contribute to a much-needed boost for the overall economy."***

Occupy StudentDebt held banking practices accountable for the problem of student debt. Parts of the American capitalist system that have been commonplace for years were being called immoral on a grand scale. Students in the Occupy era saw capitalism for what it was: a system designed to cater to the advantaged and privileged. Given the problems this economic “catering” caused, students believed that the only way to make their lives better was to address the problem through information dissemination and direct action protest. Once the information had been properly disseminated, students took the streets next.

The Student Week of Action was a protest by New York City students beginning November 14, 2011 and running until November 21, 2011. The goal of the action, as outlined in their inaugural statement was as follows:

*Two days ago the NYPD, under the orders of a billionaire mayor who does not represent us, raided Occupy Wall Street with riot gear and batons. Today we occupy. Everywhere. On this historic day of global action, the students of New York City public and private universities and colleges, in solidarity with the 99%, Occupy Wall Street, labor, and all those dispossessed by our economic and political system, will expand the struggle and occupy a university space.*

*Today, the university is a supreme symbol of social and economic inequality. Skyrocketing tuition costs at public and private institutions deny us access to higher education and saddle us with crushing debt. We will reclaim this elite space and make it open to all. We will foster dialogue and build solidarity between students, workers, and others excluded or marginalized by economic and social inequalities. We will build community through the commonality of occupation. We will offer free education – this is systematically forbidden. We join a long tradition of student activism and struggle. We the indebted and the future unemployed and underemployed stand committed to this movement for our collective lives. We invite all to join us in this open occupation.*

*Workers, students, and the millions of this city unite!*

*Together we will be victorious.*

*ESCALATE the Struggle. EXPAND the Movement. OCCUPY!*

As evidenced in their inaugural statement, the students in New York City, inspired by the OWS movement, led a charge against the corporatization of public and private education. Concerned with rising tuition costs, social and economic inequality, and the disenfranchisement of students, workers, etc., the student movement intended to continue the tradition of New York City student activism, especially activism in the face of capitalism's failures.<sup>45</sup> In doing this a number of direct action protests, assembly meetings, and free educational seminars were held during the week.

On November 17, 2011 at 3pm, students forewent their normal school day and engaged in protests beginning in Union Square. According to protest flyers, students were participated in order to put a stop to tuition hikes, eliminate student debt, and show solidarity with Occupy Wall Street. CUNY Ph.D. student Zoltan Gluck, in an interview with Metro's Cassandra Garrison pointed out that, "It's about uniting against the progressive attack against tertiary education over the last few decades. I would say students are not prominent enough of voice yet. Part of the aspirations of the week are to try to foster more of a spirit of collective struggle within the student community."<sup>46</sup> Gluck was not only a CUNY student during the week of action, he was also one of the organizers. Students like Zoltan Gluck represented the overall sentiment of the Student Week of Action. With clear goals in mind, the student movement appeared to be as organized as OWS and showed promise as a political group seeking to rectify the perceived problems of their demographic.

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<sup>45</sup> An Inaugural Statement of Purpose for the Occupation, Student Week of Action

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.metro.us/newyork/lifestyle/education/2011/11/14/occupy-wall-street-plans-a-student-week-of-action/>

The Student Week of Action received a great deal of support from university faculty. In an open letter from faculty at CUNY, a number of professors stood by the following statement:

*We faculty members of The City University of New York (CUNY) would like to express our solidarity with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the nascent student movement it has helped galvanize at CUNY. We support the movement's stand against the structural inequalities that lead to the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the few and against austerity measures taken during the recent economic downturn. The costs of this crisis and current social order constitute a harsh reality for many New Yorkers and especially CUNY students because our student body has always been the 99%: working-class people of all colors with a strong commitment to education and democracy. The increasing tuition costs and growing debt burden foisted upon students undermines not only CUNY's institutional goals, but also our students' very futures.*

*This is why we support the student strike organized by our students on Thursday November 17, along with the protests on November 21 against the prospect of tuition hikes to be decided on by the Board of Trustees.<sup>47</sup>*

The show of support from faculty at CUNY displays a stark contrast to the reactionism of faculty and administration during the 1930's era of activism. In the next section, we will draw comparisons and contra-evidence between the radical student activists of the 1930's and Occupy Wall Street.

## **Comparing and Contrasting the Student Activism of the 1930's with the Student Activism in Solidarity with Occupy Wall Street**

Occupy Wall Street is essentially an "open forum" movement, meaning anyone can be an Occupier. Given this, official numbers of the amount of protesters that have engaged in Occupy actions are unknown. Furthermore, it is difficult to infer, from this already ambiguous number,

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<sup>47</sup> CUNY Faculty Statement of Support, <http://studentweekofaction.wordpress.com/>, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011

how many of the participants are students. Many students have shown solidarity with OWS and have used it as a platform to help themselves on campuses in New York City and nationwide, but the fact that the movement is ongoing means the number is growing or shrinking: No one can tell which is true.

Student activism in the 1930s was much more organized and their actions were more coordinated. The groups had membership (literally card-carrying members), they held national conventions, and they were stationed on campuses, much like fraternity chapters. Technological advances aside, the enrollment numbers and protest turnouts are a testament to the desire for change the students fought for in that era. For example, the National Student League boasted an unofficial membership of between 2,660 – 3000 student members<sup>48</sup>, and claimed an on-campus participation in the tens of thousands.<sup>49</sup> Much like the NSL, the Young Communist League and the Student League for Industrial Democracy boasted larger numbers regarding on-campus participation than actual membership.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these groups was their media involvement.

In today's world, social media has rendered daily news turnaround all but useless. Occupy has made effective use of the social media medium by organizing through Twitter, Facebook, and their website.<sup>51</sup> Because social media is so effective at relaying information to all those interested in Occupy, there is no need for rally posters, in-person meetings, etc. Occupy can muster up 1000 people to march against capitalism with a tweet or a Facebook post. Due to

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<sup>48</sup> Cohen, 1993

<sup>49</sup> "Building a Militant Student Movement: Program of the National Student League", 1934

<sup>50</sup> The student LID had a miniscule student enlistment in its early stages (somewhere around 1000 members), as did the YCL (somewhere around 2200 members). Participation in on-campus protest was more commonplace than was official membership with any of the aforementioned student groups.

<sup>51</sup> *Occupy Online: Facebook and the Spread of Occupy Wall Street*, 2011, Neal Caren and Sarah Gaby, UNC Chapel Hill

the delay in information relay during the 1930s, it is an amazing feat that student activists could generate as large a turnout as they did for group-sanctioned protests. One of the great comparisons between OWS and the student groups of the 1930s is their effective use of the media medium of their time. The student groups started their own newspapers and magazines much like Occupy has a dedicated website, Facebook page, and Twitter account. However, that is not all they have.

Occupy has its own pamphlet series entitled *Occupied Media*. Occupy has used its pamphlet series to send messages to the worldwide movement<sup>52</sup> and give credence to its struggle by featuring speeches from a prominent supporter<sup>53</sup>. While powerful, the student coalitions working separately but in solidarity with, or independently of Occupy have not used this medium in the same way as the student groups of the 1930s did. Papers and essays on Occupy exist, but no dedicated student print media demonstrating their affiliations exists. This is unfortunate, but it speaks to the efficacy of social media and its replacing older mediums.

The NSL, YCL, and SLID did not have the luxury of instant communication. They relied on the media outlined above to relay their messages. Publications such as *Revolt*, the SLID magazine which would later become the *Student Outlook*, were influential in spreading pro-Socialist, anti-capitalist ideology on campus. The *Red Menace*, an YCL publication, was useful in much the same way, as was the NSL's publication, *Student Review*. Each publication was intended to not only recruit new members, but to also raise awareness of the causes of each group. The NSL, YCL, and SLID were using their tangible mediums in much the same way as Occupy uses social media mediums: recruitment and message proliferation.

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<sup>52</sup> *Message to the Movement*, by Mumia Abu-Jamal, 2012

<sup>53</sup> *Occupy*, Noam Chomsky, edited by Greg Ruggiero, 2012

Message proliferation is key, and this is where the major divergence between Occupy and the student groups of the early 1930s occurs. Occupy has a message which is simple: We are the 99%. This message is loaded with a number of principles such as social stratification, income inequality, and worker disenfranchisement. Its student sympathizers further relay messages of student indebtedness and corporatization of higher education institutions. In this message, and along with the message of students, there is little politicization. Occupy maintains an apolitical state. They engage in participatory democracy, allowing freedom of political opinion. They can be described, in the loosest of ways, as being left libertarian.<sup>54</sup> However, they are not exclusively leftist like the student groups of the 1930s, and due to this, they proliferate a message of revamping the system over a message of overturning the government.

Leftist student groups such as the NSL, YCL, and SLID did not have this apolitical message. While not exclusionary, they were doctrinal, and for this, pigeonholed themselves politically. You would not join the NSL if you were not Marxist or Communist, nor would you join the SLID if you were Marxist or Communist. It is not to say this never happened, but the messages were different. Where Occupy has a general message and a student message, the Leftist student groups had a singular message: blow up the system because it is not working. They did not compromise with capitalists and their rhetoric was unforgiving. Each student group is easily classified and their messages fit their ideology. It is the opposite with Occupy where the people were free to hold their own ideology while maintaining the same message.

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<sup>54</sup> Given its use of participatory democracy, its admonition of anarchy, and its general order, I would lay claim that Occupy is a left libertarian movement. Under the broad definition, left libertarianism is a state of egalitarian apoliticality, usually holding communalist or anarchist beliefs at the forefront of its ideology (See Chomsky, Kropotkin, and/or Zinn).



Ideologies aside, Occupy and its student champions share remarkably similar messages with the Leftist student activists in the NSL, YCL, and SLID. Occupy is a movement borne out of the failure of market capitalism<sup>55</sup>; big banks failed, the stock market crashed, unemployment soared, and a deep recession ensued. This is not unlike what was seen in the early 1930s. Capitalism's Leviathan collapsed sparking a worldwide depression where the same circumstances sparked a call for a change in the guard by students. Occupy sympathizer Christopher Haynes, in his essay *The Elitists, the Ruling Class, and Occupy Wall Street* demonstrates just what it is Occupy, and also the Leftist student groups, hate the most about capitalism: it engenders income inequality and establishes a plutocracy even where democracy exists. Subsequently, when this plutocracy is affected by destabilized financial markets and the power structure begins to collapse, harbingers of progressivism are given a moment of opportunity to spread their message.

In either case, the messages of both Occupy and the Leftist student groups were progressive. Each movement contains a message of social equity and economic fairness. Each movement despised top-heavy wealth and power structures, believing that an equitable system is needed in order to promote balance and stability. Despite the politicality and apoliticality of the Leftist student groups and Occupy, respectively, they shared a vision of a future where wealth was not a right and plutocracy was not acceptable. Occupy and the Leftist student groups of the 1930s are separated by generations, but they are inextricably linked. They shared a struggle and the root cause was the same: Capitalism failed the people and they rose up against it. In the end, the student groups of the 1930s are now shells of their former selves, if not extinct. Occupy's story has not yet been finished.

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<sup>55</sup> \*\*\*Define market capitalism\*\*\*

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper, I set out to answer the following question: During times of economic crisis, what political, social, and economic philosophies have students aligned themselves with in order to propose solutions to the real economic problems in their world? The response to this question is that students align themselves with varied political, social, and economic philosophies, but they all share a common trait: Progressivism. In a way a Wittgensteinian family resemblance exists in this subject. Student Occupiers are a lot different from Leftist students in the early 1930s. Not only has our society advanced technologically, but also our problems have been exponentially increased by the advent of globalization. Taking this into account, it is no longer responsible to admire and purport an uncompromising political philosophy such as Socialism or Communism. Rather, we must account for its historical successes and failures, taking what is best and leaving the difference out. Occupy and its student proponents recognize this, and its direct democratic manner is testament to its progressive nature.

The Leftist student groups of the early 1930s had no way of knowing that institutional Communism would fail in Soviet Russia, lead to atrocity, and bring the world to the brink of nuclear war. Instead, the NSL and YCL saw the potential in Communism as a just and fair political economic system. Leftist student activist Joseph Lash recalls: “We made mistakes speaking at least for myself—I find it difficult to forgive myself for having tarried, even fleetingly, with Stalinist totalitarianism.”<sup>56</sup> The NSL, YCL, and SLID could not have hoped for any worse an outcome than the global failure of Communism, the moderate success of Socialism,

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<sup>56</sup> \*\*\*Need Footnote\*\*\*

and the incredible rebound of Capitalism, worldwide but most notably in America, after World War II.

However, this is not the important message to take away from the examination. The NSL, YCL, and SLID dared to be progressive. Some would say that the time was ripe for progressivism to take hold and that daring was not required, but on campuses where, just a decade earlier, you were more likely to find a bourgeois student who held stark conservative values than a Leftist working class student, these groups initiated a revolt on campus. The NSL, YCL, and SLID fought the establishment. They won and lost but they left their mark and that is important. Even the students involved in Occupy know there is a history of student struggle against the capitalist system, and that they pick up today, the yoke left behind by these student activists.

If progressivism is the answer in this examination, then this paper is successful in pointing out why Occupy and its student proponents are inextricably linked to the Leftist student groups of the early 1930s. Each movement took a stand against capitalism through protest, direct action initiatives, speech, and writing. While the Leftists student groups never saw the change they championed instantiate, we do not yet know if Occupy has fostered any change in the politico-economic arena. Regardless, even if Occupy does not foster change, they and their student proponents have taken a similar stand against capitalism as the Leftist student groups did, and, in that respect, they are brothers in the fight against capitalism.

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This paper included much original research and was largely constructed through student documents such as letters, pamphlets, publications, and minutes from student conventions and on-campus meetings. Without the guidance of Dr. Robert Van Horn and Dr. Robert Cohen this task would have been insurmountable for me.

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