

Occupy Wall Street Was Good, But It Was Never Going To Be Good Enough



CJ

Polychroniou

Social movements can create change, but need proper organizational structures to dismantle hegemonic power.

Ten years ago, the Occupy Wall Street movement was born with protests in Manhattan's financial district. Its aim was to draw attention to the huge gap that had grown between the super-rich and average Americans in the age of global neoliberalism.

While it is uncertain whether it even qualifies as an actual social movement, Wall Street Occupy was a smashing success: its powerful message of the richest 1 percent owning more of the country's wealth than any other time in recent history captured the public imagination, provided the impetus for the emergence of a new wave of social activism, both in the US and abroad, and eventually became a rallying point for the left-wing of the Democratic Party.

However, like most actual social movements, Occupy Wall Street was short-lived and its lack of specific demands did not change the realities on the ground: economic inequalities have continued to grow since and Wall Street remains a dominant player in the US and world economy alike.

Social movements emerge on account of the existence of dysfunction within a political or economic system. Systemic inequality and social and environmental injustice are the primary drives behind the rise of most forms of social activism in today's world, yet the decision for people to become politically active has simple psychological roots. Social movements emerge only when discontent has become quite prevalent among a sizable segment of the citizenry. Indeed, it was feelings of deprivation and discontent that gave rise to the anti-globalization movement of

the 1990s, to the pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s, and to the Russian protest movements in 2011-2012. Nonetheless, all of those movements also phased out rather quickly, without accomplishing their intended goals, although they did cause quite a stir at the time.

The problem with social movements is that they are informal groupings of individuals or organizations which, while they can generate significant attention around an issue or cause, influence positively public opinion, and initiate some form of tangible change, they lack the instruments to dismantle hegemonic power. Put differently, social movements, generally speaking, do not last very long and ultimately fail to dismantle existing power structures because they do not invest in organizational structures.

From the above, one may be quick to jump to the conclusion that participation in political parties is the most effective way for citizens in contemporary societies to bring about structural change. Not so fast. While this may have been the case in the past, it is no longer so today because political parties, including those of left and radical ideological orientation, have undergone fundamental organizational changes. With rare exceptions, they have moved away from being mass parties and have abandoned any pretext of actually seeking to bring about profound social and economic changes. Party identification has also declined everywhere in the world, and even the distinction between Left and Right has broken down.

In sum, the best hope we have for reshaping the world is with social activism and protest movements. But sustainable activism requires implementing organizational structures which are currently missing from most social movements. It would be most helpful in this case if contemporary social movements looked to the history of the old radical Left and the way those parties managed to sustain organizational continuity while fighting for a new social and economic order under political and social conditions far more adverse than what exists today. And to the way the Austrian communist party of today has managed, through a steadfast course in old-fashioned class politics, to engage itself in community activism in the city of Graz, a strategy which led to its shocking victory last month in the city's municipal elections.

“Crown heads, wealth, and privilege may well tremble should ever again the black and red unite,” Otto von Bismarck allegedly said in connection with the political

environment of his time.

We might be able one day to express something along similar lines if social movements started to implement the organizational structures of the Old Left.

Our work is licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0). Feel free to republish and share widely.

Source:

<https://www.commondreams.org/occupy-wall-street-was-good-it-was-never-going-be-good-enough>

[C.J. Polychroniou](#) is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are ["Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change"](#) and ["Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet"](#) (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors).