

THE IDEA AS MOTOR OF HISTORY: AMERICAN POLITICS AND OCCUPY WALL STREET*

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Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was a lot of things to a lot of people, but to a large extent it was a battle over competing interpretations of the decline of American Empire. In the immediate context of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and the larger context of the end of the “American Century” and the rise of China and India, the fears, aspirations, uncertainties, and anxieties of the entire political spectrum were projected onto Occupy. For years, conservatives bemoaned the decline of the idealized mid-twentieth American century work ethic of the “Greatest Generation” that defeated fascism and solidified the country’s superpower status. They lamented a lack of religious devotion and traditional values; complaints which are often thinly veiled commentaries on America’s shifting demographics which will make the country predominantly people of color by 2043.¹ In their eyes, OWS was an especially egregious manifestation of a spoiled, soft, entitled, ungrateful generation that cried in the face of adversity as opposed to earlier generations that supposedly understood the need for stoic perseverance. Echoing the arguments of turn of the 20th century proto-fascists, conservatives essentially interpreted OWS as a potentially fatal particle of societal decadence writhing its way through this generation’s American inheritance. Rather than sleeping in a park, they

advocated the same kind of collective sacrifice (austerity) that past generations endured to pull the country out of tough times.

For liberals, America's problem stemmed from letting Wall Street run amuck and failing to keep up internationally in education and green technology. Given the fact that the already right-wing Democratic Party had drastically shifted rightward over the past thirty years, many liberals welcomed OWS as an opportunity to reconnect to their imagined self-image as the American 'Left' and feel like they were living out this generation's great social movement. That's why liberals initially flocked to a movement that many of them hoped would awaken America's conscience from its *recent* hibernation. However, once it became clear that OWS wasn't going to be the liberal Tea Party that they craved, interest waned.

Although most democrats agreed that the leftist renaissance of Occupy was in part about resisting Republican austerity, in practice the debate between the Democratic and Republican leadership wasn't about *whether* to impose austerity, but rather how much. After all, Obama's 2011 debt ceiling deal cut \$570 billion over 10 years in "nondefense discretionary spending" reducing America's nondefense spending from 3.3% of GDP to 1.7%, the lowest it's been in 50 years. It was only slightly less severe than Paul Ryan's plan, which would have lowered it to 1.5% of GDP.² These cuts reduced funding for increasingly vital programs like clean water drinking funds, FEMA assistance for disasters, nuclear waste cleanup, and low-income heating assistance for the poor.³ In April 2013, Obama's budget included planned cuts of between \$200 billion to \$380 billion *more than republicans* from Medicare and Social Security over the following decade.⁴

Common to both liberal and conservative interpretations was an unwavering modernist, capitalist faith in the irrepressible forward march of 'Progress.' Growing up in the 1990s, it was just understood that the

United States was head-and-shoulders above all other countries and that its vast power would be a given into the foreseeable future. But after September 11th and the economic crisis of 2008, political books about the decline of American Empire flew off the shelves because their narratives so fundamentally challenged the traditional American self-image. It was akin to the popularity of apocalyptic blockbusters.

However, in order to craft their bizarre populist rendition of the unbroken upward slope of American history, politicians have inevitably smoothed over some ‘nasty rough patches’ and marinated some horrible eras in vats of disinfectant. After all, it’s political suicide to speak about the genocide of the indigenous population or the fact that many of the ‘founding fathers’ were slaveholders, for example. When atrocities such as slavery or genocide are briefly mentioned, they are merely referenced as points of contrast against the inevitable triumph of the inherently righteous American spirit which had to shed some oppressive baggage over the years, but whose essence is liberty and justice.

American popular discourse about history tends to frame progress in terms of the hackneyed axiom “those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.”⁵ It’s a way for teachers to try to convince their students that studying history matters in order to prevent another genocide; however, it’s a thoroughly ahistorical premise. The notion that there are certain transhistorical ‘lessons’ that apply equally across time and space that must be learned to redirect the torrent of history away from essentially identical cycles of brutality ignores the specificity of historical context. Our most cherished values of family, community, society, labor, gender, merit, sexuality, time, space, and even history itself have drastically shifted over the centuries in ways that we can only partially understand from our vantage point. That’s not to say that we can’t learn from history. After all, if there were nothing from that past that could be made useful today then it wouldn’t be more than a curiosity. But whereas the

popular ‘doomed to repeat it’ school of thought tries to boil off the context of an event to morph it into a transhistorical ‘lesson’ out of Aesop’s Fables to justify the current status quo, more radically historicist approaches delve deep into the context of history to understand the vast differences that separate us from those who came before.

The historicist approach may sound disempowering because it emphasizes the chasms of time that separate us from those we study, but it’s actually far more liberatory. Whereas the ‘doomed to repeat it’ outlook emphasizes continuity with the past and a timeless interpretation of order born out of a pre-modern worldview that saw history as a cycle of grandeur (Rome) and decline (the “dark ages”), the historicist approach emphasizes change and difference. It allows us to study history to understand how we got where we are today and to use that information to develop concepts and ideas that fit our current circumstances rather than chain ourselves to past conventions. Of course nothing ever emerges out of the blue, there’s always an overlap between past forms and innovative breakthroughs, but a historicist approach shows us that if life was so different in the past, then inevitably it will be unfathomably different in the future.

The “doomed to repeat it” school of history is undergirded by the concept of the *idea as motor of history*.⁶ Popular American historical examples of social change (those that supposedly inculcate lessons that we can learn from to avoid repeating our nation’s past errors) reveal quite a bit about our political culture. When the Civil Rights era is brought up, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is not emphasized but its most famous leader, Martin Luther King Jr., is portrayed as an individual whose brilliant idea, or dream if you will, instantaneously changed hearts and minds once it passed through enough ears. Groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), or even the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), are sidelined in favor of supposedly isolated individuals like Rosa Parks. Parks is commonly portrayed as a visionary woman with an ‘idea’ that spread like wildfire rather than a dedicated political activist who had worked with the NAACP for a decade. Acts of civil disobedience on busses had been carried out for years prior to Parks’ famous trip to the front of the bus, which wasn’t the first bus action she had staged either.

Groups are sidelined, political conflict is at worst maligned or at best relegated to another era, activists and organizers are atomized, and their supposedly unique ideas are presented as the products of personal genius and foresight rather than especially notable variants of wider collective outlooks with deep histories. This individualistic outlook has roots in Christian theology, which posits the irresistibility of hearing the “Good News” about Christ and the immediate salvation that can be attained by embracing the idea of Jesus as personal savior. The practical implication of the concept of the *idea as motor of history* in the United States is that the way to improve society is supposedly to express an idea as an individual and hope that it’s good enough for a lot of people to agree. If you actually study history, however, you’ll realize that ideas are never enough on their own. They have to fit into the right political, economic, and cultural context and ride waves of popular upheaval to gain any traction. After all, most of us who organized Occupy Wall Street had been making the same political arguments for years before the Fall of 2011 without much of a reaction.

Therefore, when the opportunity came for Occupy Wall Street organizers in New York to express our ideas to a previously disinterested public, we tried to make the most out of the opportunity. In order to make our ideas as intelligible and accessible as possible we realized that we needed to take popular narratives, belief systems, and common sense outlooks seriously. As fellow OWS Press Working Group organizer

Michael Premo wrote, we need to engage with popular “myths” that structure our belief systems because all too often “our messaging, which instead of persuading, often assaults and repulses the very people we seek to reach.”⁷ A strategic presentation of our politics was so important for OWS because the vast majority of organizers were not interested in propping up American Empire, preserving ‘American values,’ or competing against the rest of the world as if we were living in some gigantic sports metaphor.

For although liberals and conservatives projected their interpretations of the decline of American Empire onto Occupy Wall Street, OWS organizers themselves were predominantly anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarians. As I explore in my book *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*,⁸ based on 192 interviews I conducted with the most active organizers of the movement in New York and my experience as an OWS organizer, I found that 39% self-identified as anarchists and another 33% had “anarchistic” politics (anti-capitalist, anti-hierarchical, direct action-oriented) that were largely indistinguishable from anarchism. When combined, this shows that overall 72% of OWS organizers had explicitly anarchist or implicitly anarchistic politics (78% of organizers were anti-capitalist). Therefore, most of us involved in framing messages to the general public agreed that directly calling for the immediate abolition of capitalism and the state and its replacement with directly democratic federations of workers and community councils that would prioritize fulfilling human need and attaining environmental sustainability might not easily resonate with many people who would be receptive to ideas of economic justice and a true democracy, but have negative associations with their ideological trappings.

Rhetorically, we faced a challenging dilemma: in an American society that has so thoroughly discarded leftist politics, the only way that

we could express our politics was to infiltrate some of the myths, symbols, axioms, ideas, and narratives of the dominant political culture in order to exploit their polyvalent elements for subversive purposes. If arguments for austerity, economic exploitation, and American Empire pervade the minds of many Americans and perpetuate themselves through these discourses, then many of us felt it necessary to engage with them in order to drain them of their meaning and resignify them. This was often a messy process. At times, some Occupy groups or organizers wandered too far in the direction of adopting mainstream tropes and mimicking reactionary behaviors. Nevertheless, our strategic messaging afforded us a rare and valuable opportunity to articulate a politics that was essentially anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian to a wide public and bring a lot of new people into radical organizing.

For the remainder of this essay I will touch upon four significant “myths” of American popular culture, or “ideas” that have supposedly been learned from history to avoid being “doomed to repeat it,” that OWS organizers who dealt with messaging had to face: “Shining City Upon a Hill,” “Living Within Your Means,” “A Fair Day’s Wage for a Fair Day’s Work,” and “You Will Always Have the Poor Among You.” I hope that the rhetorical strategies that Occupy Wall Street organizers implemented to address the wider public will encourage activists to put more thought into how their radical arguments are interpreted as we continue to fight against austerity, the latest front in the ongoing struggle against state and capital.

Shining City Upon a Hill

At least since the 20th century American politicians and patriotic Christians have spoken of the United States as a blessed “shining city upon a hill” based on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14) when

he is purported to have said “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Through its invocation by politicians such as John F. Kennedy and especially Ronald Reagan, it has become one of several famous phrases used to emphasize “American Exceptionalism”: the idea that the United States has had a unique national history distinct from that of other countries, that this history has produced a distinctly freedom-loving and justice-promoting culture, and that even in many cases that it’s destined to lead the way internationally. This outlook is a distant echo of the interpretation that many early Christian settlers made that God had set North America aside for the creation of a truly Christian society that could divorce itself from European social ills.

Many Americans may not realize it, but our country’s patriotic fervor is really far more pervasive and rabid than in many other countries. For example, if you go to Paris for their national day, *la Fête Nationale* (known to English speakers as Bastille Day), you wouldn’t know what day it was unless you happened to bump into the military parade. After the horrors of 20th century nationalism, many Europeans have toned down their love of country. In contrast, if you go to any American town on the Fourth of July, you can’t escape the day’s festivities. Every politician and mainstream public figure has to agree that America is, and will always be, #1. Once in a while American television features public service announcements about how the US is slipping behind a dozen other, supposedly lesser, countries in math scores or science education. I have no doubt that this is true, and that the American educational system could be a lot better in a number of ways, but why not watch those commercials and say, ‘hey, good job Finland!’ Why see success in terms of competition rather than cooperation? Don’t we ideally want all students in the world to do well? Many patriotic

Americans would rather have global educational achievement lowered so the USA can be #1 than feel inferior to Japan.

Like it or not, this was the American political culture that we had to engage with if we wanted to broaden our message beyond our radical confines. OWS organizers did this in several ways. First, it was common to argue that, given America's wealth, we should be doing a better job of taking care of each other. The resources clearly existed to have a better healthcare system, eliminate poverty, etc., but it wasn't happening. If the USA was really the greatest country in the world, then it should act like it. By associating living standards with patriotism we tried to harness jingoistic fervor for social justice. Actually, the following quote is an example of the kinds of arguments we made:

Family income has fallen by \$4,000, but health insurance premiums are higher, food prices are higher, utility bills are higher, and gasoline prices have doubled. Today more Americans wake up in poverty than ever before. Nearly one out of six Americans is living in poverty. Look around you. These are not strangers. These are our brothers and sisters, our fellow Americans.

The only thing is that this quote is from Mitt Romney's speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention, and in his eyes these problems were all caused by the Obama presidency. The fact that Romney had to continually defend himself from critiques of his vast wealth and incorporate Occupy-style messaging says a lot about how we helped to shift the country's political terrain. But rather than get caught up in the electoral circus, we sought to shift the blame toward the bankers, CEOs and financial institutions responsible for the crisis to begin with. Therefore, a second tactic that many took was to portray banks and corporations as anti-American. Common OWS talking points included points about how bankers and corporations wrecked the economy, how they continued moving jobs out of the country, how the upper class paid lower taxes than everyone else and hid their money

from taxes in offshore accounts,⁹ how free trade agreements lowered environmental and labor standards, and how most major corporations didn't pay taxes at all. Although many of the sign-holders lining Liberty Square (formerly known as Zuccotti Park) were liberals, progressives, or conspiracy theorists, most of the organizers were anti-capitalists whose goal was not simply to adjust rates of taxation but to abolish economic exploitation entirely. For those of us working toward that goal, the idea was to exploit the tensions between neo-liberalism and statist nationalism and veil our radicalism with a healthy dose of populism. In that vein, some OWS organizers tried to funnel conservative distrust of the federal government and traditional affinity toward an American 'rugged individualism' toward anti-authoritarian arguments for decentralized community and workplace self-management. By diverging from the standard liberal playbook of 'big government,' we managed to tap into the American love affair with an apolitical, 'non-partisan' orientation.

In the fall of 2011, I met a woman from the Spanish 15M movement who criticized our focus on domestic issues at the expense of internationalist messaging. I completely understood her perspective and sympathized with her priorities, but I tried to explain how Americans are so focused on what's going on in their country that language about austerity in Europe or third world debt or *campesino* movements in Latin America usually doesn't feel directly relevant. In fact, such comparisons often run the risk of sounding grandiose and head-in-the-clouds as opposed to discussions about immediate local issues like police harassment, foreclosures, and unemployment. Certainly OWS made frequent references to our solidarity with Tahrir Square in Cairo or Puerta del Sol in Madrid, but such international acknowledgements weren't what made the majority of New Yorkers and Americans agree with our message.

Living Within Your Means

A key component in the popular narrative of the American success story is 'living within your means.' Whenever you hear a politician giving a convention speech they usually briefly refer to their youth in the context of having to make do with less. Mothers are frequently lauded for their ability to balance the household budget and fathers are cherished for their work ethic in the face of scarcity. For all of the American reverence for capitalist wealth, those who make up the 'real America' are imagined as hardworking 'middle class,' rather than working class, people who get by with a modest standard of living and don't complain when they hit hard times.

This conservative reverence for working class stoicism plays an important ideological role in maintaining class rule. The underlying argument is that if you have it better than anyone else you shouldn't complain because if it weren't for capitalism or your government you might be in their position. This logic was in action on FOX News in 2011 when Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation argued that there actually aren't really any poor people in the United States because apparently 99.6% of poor families have a refrigerator, 81.4% of poor families have a microwave, and 54.5% have a cell phone. From this perspective it's shortsighted to complain about living conditions that have improved since the 19th century and are far better than those in other countries.

However, not only has the minimum wage drastically declined when adjusted for inflation since its peak in 1968 of \$1.60, which would be \$10.56 in 2012 dollars, and not only does that outlook ignore the thousands of Americans who are drowning in debt and don't have affordable access to basic healthcare, but it's a rhetorical tool to bring us

all down to the lowest common denominator. This potential danger was on display when Charles Kenny wrote the nauseatingly class-collaborationist article “We’re All the 1 Percent” in *Foreign Policy* which argued that Occupiers should “stop whining” because globally Americans are more affluent than most of the world.¹⁰ While it’s true that working class Americans have it better than their counterparts in the Global South, the only way to end class oppression is through international organizing and mobilizing. If every group that had it better than someone else just shut up and turned to their rulers like Kenny suggested we’d remain mired in subjugation.

Historically, the ruling class has implemented this basic rhetorical form to divide resistance in all its forms. Bosses have told skilled workers to “stop whining” since they had it better than the unskilled, and imperial rulers encouraged white working class settlers to see themselves as superior to indigenous populations and be thankful that they weren’t in their position. Most recently this argument has been mobilized to support austerity.

In the context of the economic crisis, the myth of meritocracy, economic remuneration based on production, and the divine wisdom of the market were all called into question. Conservative commentators responded to the assaults on meritocracy by pinning the blame on ‘entitlement.’ In their eyes, the problem boiled down to too many individuals and governments ‘living beyond their means.’ They had come to feel entitled to goods and services that they simply hadn’t earned in the old-fashioned way. Southern European countries like Greece and Spain supposedly collapsed because they had erected unmanageable ‘nanny states’ that enacted “all sorts of lavish benefits for government workers”¹¹ and sapped the population of their incentive to innovate and produce. If the United States was to avoid “ending up like Greece,” conservative pundits claimed, then the country needed to fall back on

the tried and true values that made her great and limit spending. In an absolutely asinine article entitled “In Defense of Austerity,” Steve Tobak argued that finance works the same for “individuals, families, companies and nations,” and that the same lesson that people tell their children, “that money doesn’t grow on trees,” applies across the board. Therefore, for Tobak the entire debate boils down to this “simple fact”: “you can’t live perpetually beyond your means. You just can’t.”¹²

Therefore the only “whining” that was tolerable was that which was directed toward homeowners who had made ‘reckless’ purchases or government workers, like teachers, who ‘mooched off the system.’ FOX News made a big deal out of the Heritage Foundation report that teachers “are overpaid.”¹³ What’s so misleading about the study is that although their quantitative evidence demonstrates that on average those who become teachers have their salaries raised by about 9% while those who leave teaching see them fall by 3% (which sounds plausible), the conclusion drawn by conservatives was that any group that makes even slightly more than minimum wage workers is “overpaid.” They certainly don’t apply that metric to the upper class. Moreover, this argument encourages working class people to try to pull down those around them who have made slight gains and think of economic justice as force that pulls workers down rather than pushing them up.

Many other writers have done a great job of delineating the fallacies behind the argument that the economy crashed because working people were living in luxury (although it’s true that under a capitalist system the market imposes limits on the potential satisfaction of human need through the welfare state). Here, I’ll spend a moment talking about how those arguments grafted themselves onto Occupy Wall Street. From the very start, our detractors portrayed the movement as a bunch of lazy people who were either rich (and therefore hypocrites) or were unwise with their money, had fallen into debt, and/or lacked the individual

wherewithal to help themselves. Just as conservatives tried to blame the collapse of the housing market on the ‘reckless’ purchases of homeowners who could no longer keep up with their payments rather than the criminal bankers and their fraudulent system, Occupy Wall Street was thought to be emblematic of a wider tendency of irresponsible Americans to blame others for their personal financial misfortune/errors. To counteract this individualization of economic exploitation, the OWS group Strike Debt put out *The Debt Resistor’s Operations Manual*,¹⁴ which situates consumer, medical, and student debt within a larger movement of debt resistance. As the popular OWS slogan said, “You Are Not A Loan.”

When responding to the press, Occupy organizers routinely pointed out that appeals to tighten our belts are always directed at the working class. Despite the heinous destruction of the financial sector, bankers and CEOs were still getting ridiculous holiday bonuses while the families that they put out on the street had nothing. So rather than dispute the notion that groups, families, or governments should “live within their means,” more often we pointed out the hypocrisy of the notion that the upper class was living according to their own rhetoric. This position was neatly summarized in the OWS chant: “Banks got bailed out/We got sold out!”

A Fair Day’s Wage for a Fair Day’s Work

A pivotal element in the myth of American freedom and liberty is the idea that hard work is adequately rewarded while ‘laziness’ is not. The USA is imagined as a country (or often the *only* country) where a

motivated person can go from rags to riches without outside interference. As opposed to more social democratic countries, which are imagined as soft and entitled, the United States has managed to maintain its ethos of Social Darwinist market meritocracy.

It's interesting, however, that "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work," or the notion that people should receive proportional remuneration for their labor, has been used to support both capitalist meritocratic positions and labor struggles. In the Occupy context, it was often used as a 'common sense' standard to vilify us, but its conservative interpretation was destabilized by the economic crisis. On the one hand, critics patched together the worn out argument that homeless and unemployed people should just try harder to 'get a job' and that without putting in "a fair day's work" it was spoiled of Occupy protesters to ask for 'handouts.' Yet, those arguments failed to resonate in an economic situation where hardworking people had been dispossessed by a bunch of suits who pushed around imaginary derivatives, not only failed to contribute anything tangible to society but actually destroyed the economy, and were being paid hundreds of times more than the workers that they left jobless and homeless. It was a clear example of "a fair day's work" being rewarded with economic ruin while far more than "a fair day's wage" was being paid to a bunch of criminal bankers.

Therefore, many of us used the popular concept of "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work" to evade right-wing red-baiting. When speaking with journalists, I'd often say things like 'the Occupy message isn't radical at all. We're just saying that working people should have what they need to meet their needs and live a meaningful life. The bankers have taken the radical step of rewarding hard work with destitution while they line their pockets with taxpayer money.' Part of Occupy's success stemmed from our ability to tap into popular

perspectives on justice to portray Wall Street as a deviation from American values.

But as my recreated sound bite indicates, many organizers tried to push beyond moderate slogans like “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work” toward an anti-capitalist stance. Therefore, it was more common to hear organizers saying that we need to build an economy that meets our needs than to hear rhetoric about raising the minimum wage. As the Liberty encampment indicated, a large percentage of OWS organizers advocated the traditional communist slogan “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” (although the vast majority of those in favor of this slogan came to it from a *libertarian* communist direction rather than the more well-known authoritarian Soviet-style ‘communism’ which has amounted to little more than exploitative, authoritarian regimes operating under the guise of a “workers’ state”). By pushing for an economy that meets our needs, we addressed the obvious fact that capitalism was not rewarding work while subtly reorienting popular criteria for assessing an economy. Ultimately, the first step toward inculcating an anti-capitalist consciousness is helping people realize that the highest priority for an economy is meeting our (as in the global population’s) individual and collective needs in an environmentally sustainable fashion. Once those criteria are in place, then it’s clear that the market consistently pushes in the opposite direction.

When journalists asked me whether I was an anti-capitalist (which actually happened rather infrequently), I liked to use a line I first heard from Noam Chomsky but was also used in one form or another by Martin Luther King Jr. and others that ‘what we have is socialism for the rich and capitalism for everyone else’ when the government gives the banks a second chance while throwing homeowners and the unemployed out on the curb. This angle provided an easy way to dissociate capitalism

and fairness and encourage people to focus on the material reality in front of them rather than the discourse of a supposedly ‘free’ market.

However, neither I nor other anti-capitalist OWS organizers were opposed to speaking openly about the evils of capitalism or the American government. What I’m emphasizing here is that for those of us working to articulate the politics of OWS to a mainstream audience in short sound bites on TV or through short articles in Occupy websites or periodicals, what I refer to as the first layer of OWS communication with the public, we tended to focus on bringing people into the movement based on where they were at while pushing their politics in the direction of prioritizing human need over profit, understanding the charade of electoral politics, and gaining a greater appreciation for tactics of direct action. Once we managed to gain people’s attention and bring them in, the second layer (more long-form and explicitly radical periodicals and media) and the third layer (actually speaking with radical and anarchist organizers and radicalizing through participation) of OWS communication turned many liberals into anti-capitalist anti-authoritarians.

“You will always have the poor among you”

Politically, poverty gets far less attention than it deserves in the United States. In the American popular consciousness the only people who say that they want to end poverty are adorably naïve children or hippies. In part, this is because poverty is thought to be the fault of the poor and no one can make someone else sufficiently ‘responsible’ and ‘hardworking,’ but also because grandiose political goals were sidelined long ago in favor of small ‘practical’ adjustments to a system thought to be imperfect but far better than the ‘fanaticism’ of ideology. Therefore, the generally unspoken attitude among mainstream political culture can

be summed up in the oft-quoted biblical passage: “you will always have the poor among you.” Poverty’s just part of the landscape of political life, we are told, so we need to contain it rather than undertake the foolhardy task of tackling it head-on.

The economic crisis, and subsequently Occupy Wall Street, gained media attention because the havoc of the market extended beyond its usual confines to affect many middle class people who previously considered themselves exempt from the fear of destitution. Debt, unemployment, and homelessness even haunted “kids that did everything right...they went to school, they graduated and then they faced this very problematic labor market.”¹⁵ Once you boil it all down, the media narrative was pointing to the fact that the market failed to reward merit according to the traditional equation. One could follow the rules of the game and still end up poor (or lower than one’s earlier class position).

While doing press work for OWS, it was also clear that this media narrative was about race. Journalists salivated over the opportunity to interview ‘respectable’ looking white college students that had fallen on hard times, or a formerly middle class white father of two who had lost his job and was fed up. Often we would present a reporter with several interview subjects and they would only end up using the scandalous riches to rags story of a young white person while ignoring a person of color’s testimony about resisting long-term oppression. On the night of the 2012 presidential election, conservative pundit Bill O’Reilly mourned the decline of the “white establishment” and clarified the conservative perspective that whereas white people are hardworking and self-motivated (and therefore deserving of what they have), people of color “want stuff” without earning it and, according to O’Reilly, that’s why they voted for the ‘enabling’ Barack Obama.

We found ourselves in a situation where much of the attention that OWS was generating was flowing toward us for the wrong reasons. The challenge we faced was how to thoroughly refute the capitalist and white supremacist notion that the ‘proper’ state of affairs entails a stable underclass primarily composed of people of color while capitalizing on the media frenzy.

The OWS Press Working Group worked to foreground voices of color with the media (though not as much as we should have, in retrospect) and compiled a long, diverse list of spokespeople organized by race, job, and economic situation. In terms of rhetoric, I often started speaking with journalists about the fact that this would be the first generation in a long time to have it worse than their parents. Given the liberal and conservative obsession with progress, this statement really seemed to chill many people to the bone. Pointing out the ineptitude of the market allowed us to destabilize the popular assumption that there is a clear path to material comfort. Essentially, I tried to acknowledge the reporter’s inclination to see the post-2008 period as a bizarre aberration in order to leverage that opening into a few comments about how working class people and communities of color had been facing their own economic crisis for a long time before 2008.

Many Americans like to think of their political system as an open field of political self-expression where the best ideas rise to the top and the rest sink to the bottom. Although elections are often framed in the hyperbolic language of war and conflict, most Americans actually become rather queasy at the notion that politics is fundamentally about conflict rather than individualistic free expression. Even OWS tapped into the American identification with the *idea as motor of history* with the popular slogan “You Can’t Evict an Idea Whose Time Has Come,” drafted by our Press Working Group for our press release in advance of the anticipated eviction of Liberty Square.

But ultimately ideas weren't enough with Occupy. Part of the movement's weakness stemmed from the liberal tendency of many participants to think that broadcasting their anti-Wall Street message was enough to trigger a chain reaction of social justice. But it wasn't and ideas on their own never are, and without solid, broad-based organizing ideas fade. Although Occupy initiated a number of tangible campaigns, we failed to advance beyond our initial role as an anti-establishment mouthpiece. Nevertheless, it's essential to recognize that the first step toward shifting popular consciousness on a large scale must occur at the point of ideological and political mythological production.

Notas

* Adapted from: BRAY, Mark. Infiltrating the mythology of american empire: media, history, and occupy wall street. In: SHANNON, Deric (ed.), *The end of the world as we know it? Crisis, resistance, and the age of austerity*. Oakland. Ak press, 2014.

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¹ HICKEY, Walter. Census: whites will become a minority in the united States by 2043. In: *Business Insider*, Dec. 18, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/census-whites-will-become-a-minority-in-the-united-states-by-2043-2012-12>.

² KROLL, Andy. Welcome to the United States of Austerity. In: *Mother Jones*. Aug. 2, 2011, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/08/united-states-of-austerity>.

³ GIBSON, Carl. We Pay More: US Austerity Well Underway. In: *Common Dreams*. Oct. 26, 2012, <https://www.commondreams.org/view/2012/10/26>.

⁴ THOMPSON, Derek. Reality Check: Obama Cuts Social Security and Medicare by Much More than the GOP. In: *The Atlantic*. April 11, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/04/reality-check-obama-cuts-social-security-and-medicare-by-much-more-than-the-gop/274919/>.

⁵ This saying is derived from philosopher and poet George Santayana's line "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" from his

1905-6 *The Life of Reason*. SANTAYANA, See George. *The Life of Reason* (New York. Prometheus Books,; 1998, p. 82.

⁶ The “doomed to repeat it” understanding of the relationship between ideas, history, and progress is different from a Hegelian interpretation though they share some common intellectual ancestors.

⁷ PREMO, Michael. Unlocking the Radical Imagination. In: KHATIB, Kate; KILLJOY, Margaret; MCGUIRE, Mike (eds.). *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*. Oakland. AK Press, 2012, pp. 315-317.

⁸ BRAY, Mark. *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*. Winchester, UK. Zero Books, 2013.

⁹ Right now there’s about \$32 trillion kept by the extremely wealthy in tax-free overseas accounts, more than the national debts of the USA and EU combined. See Gibson, “We Pay More.”

¹⁰ KENNY, Charles. We’re All the 1 Percent. In: *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/27/we_are_all_the_1_percent?wp_login_redirect=0.

¹¹ Quote from Stephen Moore of the *Wall Street Journal* on Fox News’ *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. See KLEINE, Albert. Right-Wing Media Falsely Compare U.S. with Greece to Support Spending Cuts. In: *Media Matters*, Jan. 2, 2013, <http://mediamatters.org/research/2013/01/02/right-wing-media-falsely-compare-us-with-greece/191976>.

¹² TOBAK, Steve. In Defense of Austerity. In: *CBS Moneywatch*, May 8, 2012, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505125_162-57429583/in-defense-of-austerity.

¹³ SMITH, Ben. Conservative think tanks: Teachers are “overpaid.” In: *Politico*, Nov. 1, 2011, http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1111/Conservative_think_tanks_Teachers_are_overpaid.html.

¹⁴ <http://strikedebt.org/The-Debt-Resistors-Operations-Manual.pdf>.

¹⁵ MOYNIHAN, Colin. In “Occupy,” Well-Educated Professionals Outnumbered Jobless, Study Finds. In: *New York Times City Room*, Jan. 28, 2013, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/28/in-occupy-well-educated-professionals-far-outnumbered-jobless-study-finds>.

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