

Occupy Wall Street's anarchist roots

The 'Occupy' movement is one of several in American history to be based on anarchist principles.
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New York, NY - Almost every time I'm interviewed by a mainstream journalist about Occupy Wall Street I get some variation of the same lecture:

"How are you going to get anywhere if you refuse to create a leadership structure or make a practical list of demands? And what's with all this anarchist nonsense - the consensus, the sparkly fingers? Don't you realise all this radical language is going to alienate people? You're never going to be able to reach regular, mainstream Americans with this sort of thing!"

If one were compiling a scrapbook of worst advice ever given, this sort of thing might well merit an honourable place. After all, since the financial crash of 2007, there have been dozens of attempts to kick-off a national movement against the depredations of the United States' financial elites taking the approach such journalists recommended. All failed. It was only on August 2, when a small group of anarchists and other anti-authoritarians showed up at a meeting called by one such group and effectively wooed everyone away from the planned march and rally to create a genuine democratic assembly, on basically anarchist principles, that the stage was set for a movement that Americans from Portland to Tuscaloosa were willing to embrace.

I should be clear here what I mean by "anarchist principles". The easiest way to explain anarchism is to say that it is a political movement that aims to bring about a genuinely free society - that is, one where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence. History has shown that vast inequalities of wealth, institutions like slavery, debt peonage or wage labour, can only exist if backed up by armies, prisons, and police. Anarchists wish to see human relations that would not have to be backed up by armies, prisons and police. Anarchism envisions a society based on equality and solidarity, which could exist solely on the free consent of participants.

Anarchism versus Marxism

Traditional Marxism, of course, aspired to the same ultimate goal but there was a key difference. Most Marxists insisted that it was necessary first to seize state power, and all the mechanisms of bureaucratic violence that come with it, and use them to transform society - to the point where, they argued such mechanisms would, ultimately, become redundant and fade away. Even back in the 19th century, anarchists argued that this was a pipe dream. One cannot, they argued, create peace by training for war, equality by creating top-down chains of command, or, for that matter, human happiness by becoming grim joyless revolutionaries who sacrifice all personal self-realisation or self-fulfillment to the cause.

It's not just that the ends do not justify the means (though they don't), you will never achieve the ends at all unless the means are themselves a model for the world you wish to create. Hence the famous anarchist call to begin "building the new society in the shell of the old" with egalitarian experiments ranging from free schools to radical labour unions to rural communes.

Anarchism was also a revolutionary ideology, and its emphasis on individual conscience and individual initiative meant that during the first heyday of revolutionary anarchism between roughly 1875 and 1914, many took the fight directly to heads of state and capitalists, with bombings and assassinations. Hence the popular image of the anarchist bomb-thrower. It's worthy of note that anarchists were perhaps the first political movement to realise that terrorism, even if not directed at

innocents, doesn't work. For nearly a century now, in fact, anarchism has been one of the very few political philosophies whose exponents never blow anyone up (indeed, the 20th-century political leader who drew most from the anarchist tradition was Mohandas K Gandhi.)

Yet for the period of roughly 1914 to 1989, a period during which the world was continually either fighting or preparing for world wars, anarchism went into something of an eclipse for precisely that reason: To seem "realistic", in such violent times, a political movement had to be capable of organising armies, navies and ballistic missile systems, and that was one thing at which Marxists could often excel. But everyone recognised that anarchists - rather to their credit - would never be able to pull it off. It was only after 1989, when the age of great war mobilisations seemed to have ended, that a global revolutionary movement based on anarchist principles - the global justice movement - promptly reappeared.

How, then, did OWS embody anarchist principles? It might be helpful to go over this point by point:

1) The refusal to recognise the legitimacy of existing political institutions.

One reason for the much-discussed refusal to issue demands is because issuing demands means recognising the legitimacy - or at least, the power - of those of whom the demands are made. Anarchists often note that this is the difference between protest and direct action: Protest, however militant, is an appeal to the authorities to behave differently; direct action, whether it's a matter of a community building a well or making salt in defiance of the law (Gandhi's example again), trying to shut down a meeting or occupy a factory, is a matter of acting as if the existing structure of power does not even exist. Direct action is, ultimately, the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free.

2) The refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order.

The second principle, obviously, follows from the first. From the very beginning, when we first started holding planning meetings in Tompkins Square Park in New York, organisers knowingly ignored local ordinances that insisted that any gathering of more than 12 people in a public park is illegal without police permission - simply on the grounds that such laws should not exist. On the same grounds, of course, we chose to occupy a park, inspired by examples from the Middle East and southern Europe, on the grounds that, as the public, we should not need permission to occupy public space. This might have been a very minor form of civil disobedience but it was crucial that we began with a commitment to answer only to a moral order, not a legal one.

3) The refusal to create an internal hierarchy, but instead to create a form of consensus-based direct democracy.

From the very beginning, too, organisers made the audacious decision to operate not only by direct democracy, without leaders, but by consensus. The first decision ensured that there would be no formal leadership structure that could be co-opted or coerced; the second, that no majority could bend a minority to its will, but that all crucial decisions had to be made by general consent. American anarchists have long considered consensus process (a tradition that has emerged from a confluence of feminism, anarchism and spiritual traditions like the Quakers) crucial for the reason that it is the only form of decision-making that could operate without coercive enforcement - since if a majority does not have the means to compel a minority to obey its dictates, all decisions will, of necessity, have to be made by general consent.

4) The embrace of prefigurative politics.

As a result, Zuccotti Park, and all subsequent encampments, became spaces of experiment with creating the institutions of a new society - not only democratic General Assemblies but kitchens, libraries, clinics, media centres and a host of other institutions, all operating on anarchist principles of mutual aid and self-organisation - a genuine attempt to create the institutions of a new society in the shell of the old.

Why did it work? Why did it catch on? One reason is, clearly, because most Americans are far more willing to embrace radical ideas than anyone in the established media is willing to admit. The basic message - that the American political order is absolutely and irredeemably corrupt, that both parties have been bought and sold by the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population, and that if we are to live in any sort of genuinely democratic society, we're going to have to start from scratch - clearly struck a profound chord in the American psyche.

Perhaps this is not surprising: We are facing conditions that rival those of the 1930s, the main difference being that the media seems stubbornly willing to acknowledge it. It raises intriguing questions about the role of the media itself in American society. Radical critics usually assume the "corporate media", as they call it, mainly exists to convince the public that existing institutions are healthy, legitimate and just. It is becoming increasingly apparent that they do not really see this is possible; rather, their role is simply to convince members of an increasingly angry public that no one else has come to the same conclusions they have. The result is an ideology that no one really believes, but most people at least suspect that everybody else does.

Nowhere is this disjunction between what ordinary Americans really think, and what the media and political establishment tells them they think, more clear than when we talk about democracy.

Democracy in America?

According to the official version, of course, "democracy" is a system created by the Founding Fathers, based on checks and balances between president, congress and judiciary. In fact, nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or Constitution does it say anything about the US being a "democracy". The authors of those documents, almost to a man, defined "democracy" as a matter of collective self-governance by popular assemblies, and as such they were dead-set against it.

Democracy meant the madness of crowds: bloody, tumultuous and untenable. "There was never a democracy that didn't commit suicide," wrote Adams; Hamilton justified the system of checks and balances by insisting that it was necessary to create a permanent body of the "rich and well-born" to check the "imprudence" of democracy, or even that limited form that would be allowed in the lower house of representatives.

The result was a republic - modelled not on Athens, but on Rome. It only came to be redefined as a "democracy" in the early 19th century because ordinary Americans had very different views, and persistently tended to vote - those who were allowed to vote - for candidates who called themselves "democrats". But what did - and what do - ordinary Americans mean by the word? Did they really just mean a system where they get to weigh in on which politicians will run the government? It seems implausible. After all, most Americans loathe politicians, and tend to be skeptical about the very idea of government. If they universally hold out "democracy" as their political ideal, it can only be because they still see it, however vaguely, as self-governance - as what the Founding Fathers tended to denounce as either "democracy" or, as they sometimes also put it, "anarchy".

If nothing else, this would help explain the enthusiasm with which they have embraced a movement based on directly democratic principles, despite the uniformly contemptuous dismissal of the United States' media and political class.

In fact, this is not the first time a movement based on fundamentally anarchist principles - direct action, direct democracy, a rejection of existing political institutions and attempt to create alternative ones - has cropped up in the US. The civil rights movement (at least its more radical branches), the anti-nuclear movement, and the global justice movement all took similar directions. Never, however, has one grown so startlingly quickly. But in part, this is because this time around, the organisers went straight for the central contradiction. They directly challenged the pretenses of the ruling elite that they are presiding over a democracy.

When it comes to their most basic political sensibilities, most Americans are deeply conflicted. Most combine a deep reverence for individual freedom with a near-worshipful identification with

institutions like the army and police. Most combine an enthusiasm for markets with a hatred of capitalists. Most are simultaneously profoundly egalitarian, and deeply racist. Few are actual anarchists; few even know what "anarchism" means; it's not clear how many, if they did learn, would ultimately wish to discard the state and capitalism entirely. Anarchism is much more than simply grassroots democracy: It ultimately aims to eliminate all social relations, from wage labour to patriarchy, that can only be maintained by the systematic threat of force.

But one thing overwhelming numbers of Americans do feel is that something is terribly wrong with their country, that its key institutions are controlled by an arrogant elite, that radical change of some kind is long since overdue. They're right. It's hard to imagine a political system so systematically corrupt - one where bribery, on every level, has not only been made legal, but soliciting and dispensing bribes has become the full-time occupation of every American politician. The outrage is appropriate. The problem is that up until September 17, the only side of the spectrum willing to propose radical solutions of any sort was the Right.

As the history of the past movements all make clear, nothing terrifies those running the US more than the danger of democracy breaking out. The immediate response to even a modest spark of democratically organised civil disobedience is a panicked combination of concessions and brutality. How else can one explain the recent national mobilisation of thousands of riot cops, the beatings, chemical attacks, and mass arrests, of citizens engaged in precisely the kind of democratic assemblies the Bill of Rights was designed to protect, and whose only crime - if any - was the violation of local camping regulations?

Our media pundits might insist that if average Americans ever realised the anarchist role in Occupy Wall Street, they would turn away in shock and horror; but our rulers seem, rather, to labour under a lingering fear that if any significant number of Americans do find out what anarchism really is, they might well decide that rulers of any sort are unnecessary.

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