

GLOBALIZATION OF CAPITAL, GLOBALIZATION OF STRUGGLE

“Rise like lions after slumber...Ye are many, They are few.” (Shelley, “The Mask of Anarchy”)

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It was a long time coming. Governments collapsing in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and perhaps soon in Yemen and Syria; repeated uprisings against austerity in Greece, riots in Britain, 100,000 “incidents” per year in China, month after month of student mobilization in Chile; finally, the worldwide wave of struggle of 2011 came to the U.S. in Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and subsequent occupations in 1500 American cities. For the U.S., as for many of the countries in the Middle East, decades of the glaciation of struggle melted away in weeks. 2011 may not have had quite the global reach of 1968, but in the U.S. at least, it in some ways surpassed 1968 in the months of sustained confrontation in so many places at the same time. As we said last spring about the important Madison forerunner of the fall Occupy movement, the old mole did its work well. Whatever else may happen from now on, a new historical period has opened up, and the decades in which the grinding post-1970’s crisis were borne in silence, or sporadic uprisings were defeated in isolation, are over. Something has escaped the control of Democrats, the NGOs, SEIU and the left sects—of official society and those attempting its mere facelift-- which will not be easily brought to heel. Hundreds of thousands of people who had never before been in mass mobilizations (or mobilizations of any kind) found themselves confronting the police, facing tear gas and pepper spray, going to jail and learning in the streets what can never be learned any other way, namely the real role of the state’s “special body of armed men” and the fluidity and ebbs and flows of an unfolding practical movement in motion. As Marx once put it, “one concrete step forward of the real movement is worth a hundred programs.” 2012 shows every sign of being the year of further steps, and all the forces of the old world are scrambling for places in spurious hopes of shunting the movement into the Obama re-election campaign and into a kinder, gentler union movement, one which has for so long declined in its parochial, provincial preoccupation with keeping up the dues base long enough for the current generation of bureaucrats to retire with their multiple pensions and “après nous le deluge”. (For most people, young or old, black or brown or white, the deluge started long ago.)

Insurgent Notes thus devotes the bulk of this issue to the Occupy movement.

Occupy in the U.S. of course invites inevitable comparison with the 1960’s. And though we do not wish to discourage the great majority of participants in OWS and elsewhere, too young to have experienced that decade, by invoking the long shadow of the sixties, a few comments are indeed in order to measure the historical distance from that era. The social and economic situation today is obviously far more dire. True, 1968 was exactly the year in which post-1945 trends toward greater income equality (not just in the U.S. but throughout the “advanced capitalist” world) were reversed, to become more unequal in the U.S. today than even in 1929. And one theme common to 1968 and 2011 is that of downwardly-mobile college-educated youth; it’s just that in 1968, the great majority of New Leftists did not yet know that most of them were downwardly mobile. No one today, in contrast to then, is talking about the “affluent society” or the “leisure society” or the looming “ten-

hour work week” conjured up by some anarcho-futurologists who didn’t understand that technology per se is not capital, and that capital only exists by exploiting living labor.

The 2011 movement, given the more critical situation which gave rise to it, has been on a much faster learning curve than the U.S. movement of the 1960’s. If we view the “sixties” as lasting, in reality, from 1955 (the Birmingham bus boycott, the mass wildcat in auto against the UAW’s much-touted contract of that year) to 1973 (the “oil crisis”, the end of the postwar boom and the end of the wildcat movement) we note that it was not until 1965 that black militants (whatever their other problems) broke with the earlier pacifism of the civil rights movement, that the movement against the Vietnam War needed years to move from marginality to broad support in the population as a whole, and that the white, middle-class New Left student movement needed similar years to evolve from the vague discontent of the 1962 Port Huron statement to anything resembling an anti-capitalist perspective (however warped the largely Stalinist, Maoist and Third Worldist forms of that “anti-capitalism”) by 1968-69.

By contrast, the Occupy movement of 2011, particularly on the west coast, took only weeks (or less¹) to see the need to link up with broader working class strata, to begin to question (at least by an important minority) the capitalist system per se, to go beyond its early pacifist outreach to the police, to attempt, with some success, to go beyond its initially white middle-class core to ally with blacks and Latinos, and most importantly, to strike an important chord of sympathy with the broader population.

OWS also echoed the early 1960’s New Left in its mistrust of leaders², ideologies and demands. This reflected a decade or more of experience by some of its core members in actions before and after the 1999 Seattle mobilization against the WTO, with the consensus meeting format (sometimes diluted to 90% or 80% agreement) and the “people’s mic”. These methods were developed for many reasons, among them the negative counter-model of older left faction fights and left sect attempts to infiltrate and manipulate meetings in search of recruits. Many “stars”, Hollywood and others, who visited occupied sites in sympathy or support duly accepted the same rules. The consensus format may not survive when more strictly working-class strata go into motion and more divisive questions confront the movement (the latter having already surfaced in Occupy in a number of cities over the

¹ It should not be forgotten that Occupy Portland and Occupy Seattle had before them from the beginning the reality of the (still far from resolved) August confrontation between longshoremens and police in Longview, Washington, which is treated in several contributions to this issue of Insurgent Notes.

² OWS and other occupations were not quite as free of “leaders” as was widely touted by both the movement and the media; cf. John Heilemann’s article in the December 2011 issue of New York Magazine (<http://nymag.com/news/politics/occupy-wall-street-2011-12/>) or the Oakland “insurrectionist anarchists” mentioned in Jack Gerson’s article in this issue of IN. Over time, these “non-leader leaders” became known as the “1% of the 99%”.

question of the police, the presence of Ron Paul sympathizers, the splits between the liberal/ social democratic majority at the origins with the emerging radical currents etc.) but it did have the merits of forcing speakers to talk succinctly and to the point, to avoid ideological diversions and to keep attentions focused.

Nor should it be forgotten that the early 1960's New Left also began with a distrust of "ideology", only to wind up in the late 1960's mired in the worst "first time tragedy, second time farce" regurgitation of 1930's variants of Stalinist ideology. "Ideology" is by definition a falsification of reality, to which we counterpose *theory*. "Consciousness is something the world must acquire, even if it does not want to", as someone once wrote³. Like all young movements emerging from deep social processes, Occupy will have to confront more clearly where it stands on questions of program, its relationship to the millions of working people who sympathized from afar but went about their daily routines often a block away from the occupations, the dynamic of race and class in American society, not to mention to the capitalist mode of production and its abolition. It was refreshing indeed, in contrast to the 1960's, that the participants in Occupy were clearly struggling *for themselves*, and not in a vague solidarity with little-understood peasant guerrillas or bureaucratic statist regimes on the other side of the planet. That reality, by itself, turns the page on an era.

OWS and its nationwide offshoots did, however, have a diffuse ideology, and that ideology was populism, a current with deep roots in American history. While the idea of the "99%" did serve to capture the popular imagination by highlighting the unprecedented amassing of wealth by the "1%" (or the 0.1%, or the 0.01%) in recent decades, it equally fostered many illusions, beginning with the pacifist outreach to the police. But equally if not more problematic were a series of mystifications, above all the excessive focus on financial institutions as the heart of the crisis, as opposed to a global crisis in the spheres of material production and reproduction underway for decades, of which "financialization", however defined and however important, is merely a symptom and a response to deeper trends. Amidst the myriad of targets of the occupation movements, "capitalism" was merely one more item on a laundry list, with generally little understanding of what capitalism, or its actual abolition, entails, thus leaving the door wide open to populist slogans from "Abolish the Federal Reserve" to "tax the rich" and "make the rich pay their fair share". Some significant part of Occupy still remains vulnerable to the Keynesian siren songs of a Joseph Stiglitz or a Jeffrey Sachs.

One of the movement's strengths was its resistance to the pressure from various outside forces, starting with the media, for "concrete demands", not to mention for leaders able to negotiate such demands⁴ and thus become targets for repression and co-optation. As someone put it, even OWS activists who wanted demands did not know what those demands were. CLR James remarked long ago

³ Karl Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge, 1843.

⁴ Here again, OWS, or parts of it, recalled the success of the 1960's media in setting up spectacular "leaders" who then in one way or another distorted the reality bringing them their fifteen minutes of fame, and smaller numbers even remembered the battle cry of the I.W.W. from a hundred years ago "We are all leaders".

that the realities of capitalism in its statist phase⁵ educate people directly and prepare the point of departure of revolt with an inchoate sense of what is necessary. However diverse and scattered the specific consciousness of participants, the lack or refusal of demands expressed the deep reality of the movement as one of a blocked society, which implied total transformation, however poorly articulated. What were the “demands” in France in May 1968 or in Argentina in 2001/2002, or other situations where “power lay in the streets”? What are the “demands” in Greece today? The total transformation required—we call it revolution—is not something one “demands”, but something one *does*.

The movement also expresses in its concrete existence what may be its most important practical discovery: after decades of the (mainly) failures of workplace struggle, of the dispersion of the working population in further suburbanization and exurbanization, of whole deindustrialized regions, of casualization and the decline of stable, long-term employment in one workplace, the Occupy movement discovered the remaining central public space as the one place of visibility capable of reaching large numbers of people. “Making shame more shameful still by making it public” (Marx) was an important part of what OWS and its spinoffs were about, after decades in which so much degradation and rollback had been suffered in atomized silence, buried by the trashy feel-good media and the enforced anonymity of people who suffered increasing job insecurity, the reality or threat of homelessness, ever-more expensive health care or no health care at all, useless diplomas and “retraining” from dubious fly-by-night educational scams, downsizing, lengthening work weeks and declining real income with two and three precarious jobs, disappearing pensions, skyrocketing school tuitions, arbitrary week-to-week shift changes and scheduling (designed for no other reason than to tire, and demoralize, and fragment any potential workplace solidarity), electronic surveillance, and “just in time” production methods. Like the Argentine piqueteros who realized the increasing limits of struggle focused on the factory, and expanded it instead to the supermarket, the hospital, the police station and the freeway blockage, OWS discovered a form of militant organization in which a thousand different grievances could be aired and made visible, not least through its often skillful use of new electronic media.

Insurgent Notes thus presents in this issue accounts of the occupation movement in New York City as well as in Baltimore, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and, perhaps most importantly, in Oakland and Seattle, where the radicalization was arguably (along with Portland) the deepest and where the linkup with workers the most direct. These accounts show in their multiplicity the evolution away from pacifist dreams about the police, the growing participation of working people and working people of color, the different local relations between Occupy, the official labor movement and the rank-and-file (as in Oakland and in Seattle), how the movement (as in Seattle) confronted the problems of violence within the occupation, and how, through experience, a radical current emerged (or didn’t emerge) in relation to the liberal/ social- democratic forces that were dominant at the outset.

⁵ CLR James, *Facing Reality*, Bewick Publications 1958. James was talking about “state capitalism” as a world phenomenon of the 1950’s, but his remark can equally be applied to the arguably more pervasive, quasi-totalitarian expansion of commodity relationships since then.

We also continue our chronicling of the decomposition of the U.S. economy and society with an article on U.S. infrastructure; with a letter from Paris on the background of Olivier Besancenot, who made a furtive appearance in New York promoting his disintegrating “New Anti-Capitalist Party”, and finally an update on the “indignados” movement in Barcelona.

From the Break Their Haughty Power web site

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