

Interview



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Q: How do you think the Occupy movement compares to other movements?

A: There is really nothing to compare it to. It's on the precipice of something that doesn't really have any real analogies. The divergence of wealth that has happened in the post-industrial revolution and especially the past 50 years has never been seen before. The other driver of this is that there is what's happened to the middle class, which has largely been a buffer for revolutions. The role of an important middle class is that it gives the lower economic classes something to aspire to and it gives a check and balance on the upper class. So the shrinking of the middle class has led to a situation where they are organizing in a way that they've never organized before, there are technology and tools that they've never had before. Then there's this emergent property that's happened around the type of organization that is happening there: the role of general assembly, the human microphones, the hand signals. All these are part of a very distinct culture created out of this discontent.

What's different is that a) the socio-economic analysis of a middle class shrinking to a point where they now feel like a 99-percent minority. Besides for maybe the French Revolution that's never really happened. If you look at Arab Spring, the difference is that they never felt like a middle class, they felt like a marginalized outskirts of society, basically an oligarchy and them; b) then there's the tools and technology situation; and c) the emergent culture that's come out of it and how it's attracting other people around it. I think those three things in many ways don't have analogies anywhere else.

Q: For the climate movement, what lessons should climate folks be drawing from what the Occupy folks are doing?

A: It's been a trigger in public consciousness that they've exploited strategically and smartly. There's this overwhelming sense that people are fed up, are on the point of a threshold etc, that sense of urgency and immediacy has been really well telegraphed by Occupy Wall Street, things such as how do you exploit a moment, how do you create a

narrative that draws a sense of urgency around it and not false urgency—not COP 15 (UN Climate Change Conference 2009), not COP 16 (UN Climate Change Conference 2010). But a sort of existential threat moment. That’s kind of crucial and an interesting thing from a climate point of view.

The second thing is their ability, through navigating and negotiating on a daily basis, to not to be crazy. They’re doing a very good job on everything from language—we are the 99 percent—to explaining the divergence between rich and poor in this country. They’ve been really smart at that.

The third thing is that it’s quite leaderless. Of course, in many ways the climate movement is leaderless as well. But they (Occupy) have exploited leaderlessness to its advantage as opposed to a climate movement that, by omission, uses leaderlessness to its detriment. The Wall Street guys are saying ‘we’re not going to negotiate to an all-powerful decision maker, please hear us out’ which is more the climate approach. It’s much more: ‘we are a force to be reckoned with and you should come to us and negotiate with us; we’re basically going to use our leaderlessness in order to not be thrown in jail or not be victimized or demonized in a way that’s so easy to do when you are a leaderless movement.’ And the use of technology to do that, so mass organization to get people places etc. If you look at the climate movement, there isn’t the advantage of leaderlessness which is like ‘look I can do mass protests and not get arrested.’ It feels rudderless.

Q: What do you think climate activists should be doing about this?

A: We should a) accept the fact that we’re leaderless and not try to look for a messiah to deliver us and to be okay with that; b) organize in a more politically radical way and get away with things we probably couldn’t get away with if we had a leader who has to negotiate on behalf of us; and c) ask ourselves how do we use the tools and technology to organize us in physical demonstrations, how do we organize our equivalent of the general assembly, what are our gestures, our language, our symbols, pieces of iconography, what are our moments?

None of that’s being done because everyone thinks there’s going to be some sort of messiah to come and tell us these things. And there isn’t. I think the first step is taking ultimate responsibility and b) being okay with the fact that that’s the case and c) moving the organization around what that means and then ask questions about how we can create outrage. You read the Stern Review (on the Economics of Climate Change) the fact that half of our biodiversity on the planet will die by 2050 if we’re gunning for what we’re mitigating for which is a four-degree rise. Why is that not basic knowledge? If people can tell you that the top 1 percent owns 60 percent of the wealth in this country, why don’t they know our equivalent of that fact?

Q: Tell me about your thoughts on how the environmental movement should reorganize itself?

A: TckTckTck is an interesting example of coming together for a moment, creating an organization. They did a decent job, but were probably too determined by the old paradigm of negotiating politics with the all-powerful forces that be around COP 15.

With organizations, there's a difference between super novae and red dwarves, with super novae being these moments of organizational intensity and red dwarves being the long-lasting institutions such as the UN. Occupy Wall Street is a super nova. Temporarily organized, with high amounts of energy. And I think we can possibly do the same in a way that is not linked to COP 15 that doesn't live or die by one climate negotiation by a bunch of bureaucrats. How do we create sense of urgency, and how do we create an association, not necessarily a mass committee, that's more of an alliance than a committee that can come together, organize and create a sense of outrage and has some infrastructure that lasts beyond a moment but also starts with that moment.

I look at Occupy Wall Street and think that if it went away and died in three months I don't think the world would mourn the infrastructure of Occupy Wall Street, but what it did create was this residual effect: now people have a physical space which is Zuccotti Park and there's also a community of people you meet that you will be friends with for years to come. That's the type of infrastructure that should last. The type of infrastructure that shouldn't last is the boardrooms of formal associations, the UN structure. So I think thinking of a new type of organization that can be more of a super nova, that can be our equivalent of Occupy Wall Street. TckTckTck is a good example it's just not organized around a moment like that.

Q: How prominent is the environment and climate among the issues down at Occupy Wall Street?

A: It's really not. It's a tertiary issue area. They use it as a reference to how corporations have gotten out of control. It's more of a validating point than an organizing point.

Q: It seems that the potential is there for it to become an organizing point.

A: It should be a major part of the discussion; it's incumbent on us to be part of the discussion.

Q: It's all about the same issue.

A: Totally. It's also about a bigger issue too, which is the organization of our socioeconomic system at a super-structural level. These are structural issues; we've organized our economy in a way that exploits the environment, externalizes all costs and doesn't use natural resources as any form of indicator for success or failure and that's totally related to Wall Street greed and all the other sloganeering that's going on down there.

Q: Do you anticipate that climate will become a major component of Occupy and/or that there will be alliances made?

It's incumbent upon us to be part of the discussion. We need to spend time creating climate working groups and shifting the dialogue to 'hey look, part of the diagnosis of the problem is that it's a climate problem.' I think that's totally doable. I think having climate campaigners as local organizers for Occupy is a great strategy. I know that the guys in Lead Now in Canada are doing some Occupy stuff. We need to elevate this to be a social justice campaign that holds all these things under it. This will make climate relevant as well.