

What's up with the Occupy protests - for a sustainable culture?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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As I observe the Occupy Wall Street protest and its manifestations elsewhere, I have wondered about my own excitement over the phenomenon. I have been slow to say to myself, "This is it! I've been advocating nonviolent civil disobedience in the streets, and now it's here!" I'm glad and supportive, but to get involved right now by traveling to NYC was hardly thinkable.

But in my town, Santa Cruz, California, 200 people showed up tonight (Tuesday) downtown and resolved to begin the indefinite Occupy encampment on Oct. 6 by the court house at San Lorenzo Park.

I have a full plate of other projects, so I have until now cheered on others getting in the trenches in New York and Washington, D.C. I admit I doubted there would be a groundswell and that other cities' protests would sprout up fast, as they are. Or, I assumed they would be small and peter out soon. I've been in the trenches so long it's a lifestyle, and one gets jaded. I've been wrong before: I thought the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle, 1999 would not be a big deal. But I was amazed at the power of masses of engaged citizens, and I reveled in helping to shut down the WTO. One really ought to witness phalanxes of robocops attacking peacefully assembled citizens.

Until now I've looked hesitantly at the bright development of the Occupy movement. I was also glad to see nonviolent resistance and arrests at the White House over the tar sands pipeline, but I wasn't sure I had to go there to get arrested for what I believe in. (What I believe in is not a "clean energy economy" when it could also be mega-corporate, even if petrocollapse could allow for a whole new infrastructure.) One reason for not altering my plans is a previous commitment: I persevere with the Wrongful Death Complaint in Santa Barbara Superior Court regarding my abused mother, a victim of oil money.

Too many people for the ecosystem, and cheap, abundant oil is gone

To march in the streets and chant does not appeal much to me if mere reformism is the idea. The prevalent critique of the system is superficial and pulls punches. Commentators and critics seem to be unconsciousness about our culture, such that root issues are unmentioned. Physical realities such as biology are ignored: we have vast overpopulation, yes in the U.S. too, and with too many people comes strife and the starker effects of extreme greed. This is an unpopular view, particularly among those who believe the already stressed global ecosystem can be managed for several billion people indefinitely. But the means to replace cheap petroleum across the board, when it grew the economy and the population, are not at hand, although renewable energy can and will be used for small-scale, decentralized applications.

It is more commonly agreed that we have vast income disparity and, less often pointed out, outrageous theft of the commons by the violent elite. To back up this unfair and (self)destructive system, institutions such as church, state and the entertainment media tell us that material wealth is okay, and that working hard while being a polite, religious person supportive of the right to vote is all that is required of a citizen. Meanwhile, wars continue, global warming is a byproduct of industrialism that we assume we need, and overcrowding is ignored. The myths of progress, science as god, and benevolent civilization have served to confuse people in order to keep them in check. Do you think that any "representative" government like the U.S. corporate state is going to enact population stabilization or reduction measures, when the dominant philosophy is endless growth on our finite planet? -- perhaps, when it is too late for orderly, compassionate and fair policies that the majority of citizens could possibly have supported.

The majority of protesters against Wall Street, like the ones at Tahrir Square, have not to my knowledge spoken about

overpopulation or civilization, but instead rail mainly about material deprivation and the absurd monetary wealth of the greedclass. This is healthy, but when demands are too narrow, and they are even possibly met, where are we? Back to the same underlying causes of our conflicts as we face extinction. One reason for confusion and misplaced goals is that oil and energy are poorly understood. The cost of oil is several times higher than the nominal price because of huge subsidies. So the cost is met by paying more for most other products and services. The Egyptians, Tunisians and other Arabs protesting their regimes had been faced with grinding food costs elevated by higher oil prices.

Collapse is a far greater force today than social movements. Nevertheless it is vital to resist extinction, greed, war, materialism, etc. with our bodies and minds. But to imagine we can cure our ills piecemeal or evade collapse is absurd. The system needs to be abandoned, not fixed when it is unfixable. For example, many of the protesters who are unemployed want jobs, jobs that are suspected of being withheld by greedy banksters or Republicans. But even if more jobs can be generated -- requiring economic growth that is impossible since the demise of cheap, ample oil supply -- why work for The Man?

The real alternative is community economics. This means local food production, making clothes and shelter from local materials sustainably, and doing without the vast consumption of energy that both fossil fools and technofix-environmentalists assume we need. Through bartering and mutual aid, we can dispense with the corporate economy and have better models such as alternative currency, more land trusts (residential and conservation), and rely on credit unions if necessary.

Do we need jobs, or subsistence in community?

Losing jobs is a good historical development when suddenly-jobless people see that material comfort is fleeting and needs to be re-evaluated for what is truly necessary: people drive less, begin to share more, and look to their useful skills such as gardening to avoid buying costly food unnecessarily. But being jobless also enables people to get out in the streets to protest. Unfortunately, the common sentiment is that more money or a "better job" will actually solve individuals' long-term problems. This is not the 1950s, '60s or '70s when The American Dream appeared so reasonable (unless you were a hippie dreamer).

The crucial question is what people are actually protesting. What is their vision for society? No doubt there is great diversity of answers among the protesters. Most of them share the less-often stated priorities of ending the wars and curbing global warming. But are the aims and dreams of the majority of the protesters really up to the task? Fortunately, many realize that individualism is passé.

Number one must be a sustainable culture that recognizes the overdue priority of harmony with nature and restoring the ravaged ecosystem. Only then can social justice be achieved and long lasting. To assume that righting wrongs -- struggling over the shrinking pie -- will allow us to finally treat Mother Nature right, is folly. Part of the problem is that "green" people define for themselves a convenient limit for change. Consumer society, which means all modern peoples, is shot through with a sense of privilege for enjoying technological conveniences. One Green Party activist in northern California told me, after we had worked together a while on and off campus, and we respected each other's work, "I'm not gonna live in a fuckin' teepee." I was disappointed to hear her say that, not because I wanted her to live in a teepee with me, but because she wanted to keep her relatively high-energy-consuming, suburban lifestyle. This would be okay if there were only a tiny fraction of consumers in existence. But with high population size, her sense of privilege flies in the face of indigenous, traditional ways that tread lightly on the land for uncounted millennia.

It comes down to these questions:

- What are we really willing to change?
- Can we question our way of life and imagine living very simply?
- Do we recognize other species' right to flourish, or do we believe we can and should grow and grow -- to become 10 million benign vegans in a less biodiverse people-farm?" (Not that this is achievable anyway, but it's a common misconception.)

If we aren't considering those questions as we demonstrate in the streets, write letters-to-the-editor, blog or comment on blogs, etc., we might "not know what we're fighting" ("Now there's revolution, but they don't know what they're fighting" - Jethro Tull's song Living In The Past, 1969).

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Resources:

Website for Occupy Wall St.

Stop the Machine! Create a New World! -- the resistance to the 10 year Afghanistan invasion. It officially was scheduled for Oct. 6 in DC but

Occupy DC has started. A DC protester's blog: Communique from Occupied DC: Day One

hub for many cities actions: Occupy Together

Occupy Wall Street Protesters Used Alternative Social Networks

Further reading and background -- essays by Jan Lundberg:

UK Riots' Resource and Cultural Roots: an in-the-trenches report

Social Justice Activists Must Take Into Account Ecological, Cultural, and Economic Transformation

Social Justice: Too little and Too Late to Demand More Pay and Better Jobs? (Part 2)

Why it's best that people lose their jobs in this unsustainable economy

The Depression Has Come - Let's Finish the Job, Right