Erasing/Seizing Wealth of "The 1%" Cannot Create Viable Middle Class or Solve Sustainability Crisis

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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There may well be a revolution, peaceful or otherwise, based on the outrageous income disparity perpetrated by greedy, non-civic minded capitalists. However, even if their vast monetary wealth were turned over to "the 99%," divided equally and put to good uses for future generations, the problem is that today's wealth is almost entirely artificial. It has become digital and is little else.

Of useful, lasting value is the land that can grow food, retain water, and withstand climate chaos on the rise.
One can only hope that the Occupy movement will hit upon this and recognize that whether reforms or a revolution upset the apple cart -- allowing the common people to get their share of apples -- today's astronomical sums of funny money is not edible. Today it can buy a lot, true, but there is no future for a financially based economy propped up by inflated home values, loans, debts, and deficit spending. The cheap oil that built everything physical is now past its halfway depletion point globally, and oil's high price is hugely subsidized.

Think of it this way: if there are 100 people in a community, and one person owns several times as much wealth as the average person among the other 99 based on the industrial, material and financial system, what happens if the community is faced with a permanent cessation of key resources and most output? Before the cessation there could be redistribution, but an unsustainable economy based on endless growth -- when resource constraint has terminated growth -- will sustain no middle class splendor for the other 99 (or 72 or 35, what have you). You can picture the wealth running out for everyone -- even if it were not the digital, inflated money that formed Wall Street fortunes based on "financial instruments" that compounded and multiplied bundles of debt down to the local and individual level.

So the timing of the Occupy revolution -- whatever it becomes, if it succeeds somehow in redistributing today's material and digital wealth -- happens to come not only when income disparity is at an all time extreme, but when population size is at an all time high, and the unusustainable economy is teetering. It is not teetering because "the 1%" took more than their share (although the greed aggravated symptoms of unsustainability), but rather because the natural wealth of healthy land, clean water, stable climate, rich biodiversity, have been severely depleted.

Global greenhouse gas emissions are unabated, and climate scientists are now saying that turning the warming trend around is probably not possible. So, how can redistributing the pie of consumption solve anything, unless an accompanying lifestyle change and massive tree planting take over?

The New York City greater metropolitan area has over 25 million people. Their ecological footprint is about 19 times the area of the land they occupy. So where are the resources, such as food, energy, materials, water and air coming from? Answer: from healthier land far removed. The idea of a transition to a sustainable, steady state economy is beautiful and sensible. But with such high numbers, and almost no effort happening on a large scale to conserve or restore nature for local food production, for example, even a wildly successful Occupy movement or Transition Town program cannot care for 25 million people depending on a huge footprint. Today only 5 out of 6 people in the U.S. are not going hungry, but it is accomplished through expensive and subsidized petroleum, dwindling clean water, and food imported from afar. Money from the super rich would not change the big picture long into the future.

Given all of the above, one must conclude that the Occupy movement should recognize that economic and ecological collapse are in the pipeline, and that redistribution of land is more important than stripping the super rich of most of their money. Because, that money won't do much to sustain people in today's damaged, overpopulated and depleted world. Even if "the 1%" let go of most of their wealth voluntarily, and saw to it that there was even redistribution, today's modern world cannot keep up the massive consumption going on and on with no end in sight.

One could crunch numbers to arrive at various levels of sharing or redistributing wealth in order to bolster or refute the

thesis that shutting down greed will not change much. If wealth redistribution were to happen before petrocollapse and climate collapse, the redistribution itself could bring on socioeconomic collapse or financial chaos. Regardless, there is no disputing that the consumer economy and our population size are unsustainable. No matter how you slice it, the vast wealth today generated for the enjoyment of the few, even if re-routed, is not going to allow for a happy, enlarged middle class who could be indefinitely satisfied with one nice car, one spacious or comfortable home, etc. An apt comparison is that Western Europeans consume half the energy that North Americans do, per capita -- that's admirable and superior, but also unsustainable.

So it is too late for mass exuberance, as Overshoot author William Catton termed our modern lifestyle and economy. To demand, as some Occupiers do, "our economy back" or to criticize the banksters for "wrecking our economy" is to cling to the American Dream, as if it were obtainable by everyone forever. Similarly, to imagine that the U.S. corporate state was a democracy working just fine until perhaps 1980 or 2001, the basis of the nation's power structure is forgotten or never learned. These delusions merely glorify the prior decades up to now that were unacceptable then, too, and assuredly were leading to the more aggravated class distinction we see today.

A non-exuberant lifestyle and a common set of realistic, nature-loving, cooperative aspirations need to take the place of the dominant paradigm that has been faulty and unfair from the start. Expansion was able to take care of much potential discontent for many decades, and with no more expansion or bona fide "recovery" it's no wonder that discontent is rising now in the streets when the curtain has come down on growth.

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"Occupy the Land" goes into the issues of global land reform and the chances for the Occupy movement's evolution:
How The Occupy Movement May Be Off-Base, and How It Can Evolve

Catton, William R., 1980, Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change. Urbana: University of Illinois Press

Greenhouse gases soar; scientists see little chance of arresting global warming this century - The Washington Post

Level of Heat-Trapping CO2 Reaches New High, Growth Rate Speeds Up, Methane Levels Are Rising Again - ThinkProgress

Prior articles by Jan Lundberg on the Occupy movement:
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Also in this report on the global Occupy movement:

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