

Student's name

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Course

Date

Occupy Wall Street

Introduction

In a very real sense, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement is unlike any other known to American history. It may not be equated to the great Civil Rights actions of the 1950s and 1960s, nor to the ongoing issues of women's and gay rights, simply because it is a movement apart from the efforts of any population disenfranchised by virtue of race, gender, or orientation. Its only parallel, in fact, may be observed in its resemblance to the tides of social and political activism that spurred on the creation of the United States itself, for this is a movement based on the discontent of the many against a privileged few. Furthermore, and also going to the movement's similarity with the American Revolution, it may be argued that the most striking element of OWS lies in its lack of any definitive goal. Occupy Wall Street is an extraordinary movement in American history, if only by virtue of its insistence on two components difficult to legislate, yet crucial to a republic: accountability and equality.

Discussion

It is likely that future generations will perceive OWS as an inevitability, given the enormous circumstances preceding it. It may well be felt that whatever sense of national pride left extant in Americans had no choice but to respond in this way to a series of stunning crises. On one level, the public was made painfully aware of the costs of recent wars. By 2010, it was accepted that Iraq and Afghanistan had already cost the nation some \$1.2 trillion, with the eventual tally estimated at \$3 trillion (Edsall 151). At the same time, Americans were

experiencing an economic crisis many equated to the Great Depression of the 1930s. The recession of 2008 created in many an unease not known in their lifetimes, and one which was vastly exacerbated by the news of massive bail-outs to corporations which, if not irrefutably corrupt, certainly evinced disastrous policies. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 alone cost \$787 billion and, while ongoing research points to substantial benefits from it, the reality remains that unemployment increased by 10 percent after it was active (Romer). Then, it became known that insurance giant AIG received hundreds of billions in government bailout funds, part of which went to \$165 in executive bonuses. There were other bailouts, and public outrage was so intense, death threats were reported as made on the corporate executives (Rasmussen 176). American society, confronted by extraordinary maneuvers of fiscal and political import, perceived inequality as becoming both boundless and sanctioned by their elected officials.

As these fiscal affairs reached unprecedented levels, there appeared to be a more blatant, governmental schism between concerns for the wealthy, and the middle class and disadvantaged. The legislative legacy of President Bush, departing office in 2008, was virtually reactionary; laws governing mining discharges were relaxed, as power plants were allowed to release more pollutants (Edsall 16). Even these grossly mercenary measures paled under the assault on Medicare and Medicaid launched by Senator Paul Ryan in 2011, intended to end government funding for those eligible (Edsall 161). In this same year, the Congressional Budget Office released a report asserting that the recession notwithstanding, income rose dramatically for those earning in the highest percentiles (Porter). It must be reiterated, too, that there was a strikingly overt quality to these actions. It may be argued that, if Americans anticipate a certain amount of self-serving from their leaders, they also expect it to be veiled in denial, or couched in language emphasizing equality as the ultimate goal. This was, plainly, no longer the case. The Republican

Tea Party, for example, made it distinctly clear, when OWS first emerged, that it defied any attempts to be identified with the movement. At the same time, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee evinced support for the movement (BBC News). It seems that for the first time in American history, contrasting interests were openly blurring the lines between economic wealth and political standing.

Since its inception in 2011, OWS has been targeted by critics for having an indistinct agenda (Porter). The selection of the Wall Street site as the original protest location, in fact, is and was intended as a metaphor. What is most interesting here is how this perceived weakness within the movement actually ignores its greatest strength. The adoption of the Wall Street metaphor is by no means irrelevant, as those dealing on Wall Street typically comprise the grossly disproportionate incomes fueling the protest. Also, great change need not be prompted by a specific complaint. As with the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement, widespread feelings of injustice have historically resulted in the most profound alterations within the society and the government. It is equally unwise to underestimate the impact of OWS because, historically again, such movements tend to find their own “solid ground.” As any grassroots movement evolves, its identity shifts to meet changing conditions. Recently, as the devastation of Sandy impacted on many, OWS has established online outlets at Amazon.com and Wal-Mart, ingeniously employing wedding registry systems to bring necessary goods to storm victims (Faughnder). The efforts are striking; as perceptions that the organization had only a diffused ambition are directly challenged, and its insistence on the welfare for the many is translated into direct assistance. On another, OWS benefits from the implied criticism of the *status quo*. While only professing to help address needs, there is nonetheless the emphasis made that governmental and/or charitable organizations may only do so much and that Americans must, first and foremost, rely upon one another. Here, then, the guiding core of OWS

as “generally” seeking equality is made manifest.

Conclusion

If the Occupy Wall Street movement is without real precedent in the United States, it must also be acknowledged that the circumstances giving rise to it are equally novel. The immense costs of two wars, along with a devastating recession, set the stage for a national schism, as Republican conservatives more openly acted to protect the interests of a privileged minority. Consequently, OWS was forged as an exceptional reaction to exceptional circumstances. Its aims may yet take no direct form, efforts to assist in recent disaster notwithstanding, but that cannot eviscerate the most striking quality of the movement, which is a foundational adherence to a demand for equality. This is evocative of the greatest movements of the nation's history, and diminishing the import of this foundation is as misguided as ignoring the substance of the Constitution itself, which is based only on principles. Occupy Wall Street is an extraordinary event in American history, if only by virtue of its insistence on components perhaps difficult to legislate, but essential to a true republic: accountability and equality.

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