

The Fantastic Success of Occupy Wall Street

by *Immanuel Wallerstein*



The Occupy Wall Street movement - for now it is a movement - is the most important political happening in the United States since the uprisings in 1968, whose direct descendant or continuation it is.

Why it started in the United States when it did - and not three days, three months, three years earlier or later - we'll never know for sure. The conditions were there: acutely increasing economic pain not only for the truly poverty-stricken but for an ever-growing

segment of the working poor (otherwise known as the "middle class"); incredible exaggeration (exploitation, greed) of the wealthiest 1% of the U.S. population ("Wall Street"); the example of angry upsurges around the world (the "Arab spring," the Spanish indignados, the Chilean students, the Wisconsin trade unions, and a long list of others). It doesn't really matter what the spark was that ignited the fire. It started.

In Stage one - the first few days - the movement was a handful of audacious, mostly young, persons who were trying to demonstrate. The press ignored them totally. Then some stupid police captains thought that a bit of brutality would end the demonstrations. They were caught on film and the film went viral on YouTube.

That brought us to Stage two - publicity. The press could no longer ignore the demonstrators entirely. So the press tried condescension. What did these foolish, ignorant youth (and a few elderly women) know about the economy? Did they have any positive program? Were they "disciplined"? The demonstrations, we were told, would soon fizzle. What the press and the powers that be didn't count on (they never seem to learn) is that the theme of the protest resonated widely and quickly caught on. In city after city, similar "occupations" began. Unemployed 50-year-olds started to join in. So did celebrities. So did trade-unions, including none less than the president of the AFL-CIO. The press outside the United States now began to follow the events. Asked what they wanted, the demonstrators replied "justice." This began to seem like a meaningful answer to more and more people.

This brought us to Stage three - legitimacy. Academics of a certain repute began to suggest that the attack on "Wall Street" had some justification. All of a sudden, the main voice of centrist respectability, The New York Times, ran an editorial on October 8 in which they said that the protestors did indeed have "a clear message and specific policy prescriptions" and that the movement was "more than a youth uprising." The Times went on: "Extreme inequality is the hallmark of a dysfunctional economy, dominated by a

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financial sector that is driven as much by speculation, gouging and government backing as by productive investment." Strong language for the Times. And then the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee started circulating a petition asking party supporters to declare "I stand with the Occupy Wall Street protests."

The movement had become respectable. And with respectability came danger - Stage four. A major protest movement that has caught on usually faces two major threats. One is the organization of a significant right-wing counterdemonstration in the streets. Eric Cantor, the hardline (and quite astute) Republican congressional leader, has already called for that in effect. These counterdemonstrations can be quite ferocious. The Occupy Wall Street movement needs to be prepared for this and think through how it intends to handle or contain it.

But the second and bigger threat comes from the very success of the movement. As it attracts more support, it increases the diversity of views among the active protestors. The problem here is, as it always is, how to avoid the Scylla of being a tight cult that would lose because it is too narrowly based, and the Charybdis of no longer having a political coherence because it is too broad. There is no simple formula of how to manage avoiding going to either extreme. It is difficult.

As to the future, it could be that the movement goes from strength to strength. It might be able to do two things: force short-term restructuring of what the government will actually do to minimize the pain that people are obviously feeling acutely; and bring about long-term transformation of how large segments of the American population think about the realities of the structural crisis of capitalism and the major geopolitical transformations that are occurring because we are now living in a multipolar world.

Even if the Occupy Wall Street movement were to begin to peter out because of exhaustion or repression, it has already succeeded and will leave a lasting legacy, just as the uprisings of 1968 did. The United States will have changed, and in a positive direction. As the saying goes, "Rome wasn't built in a day." A new and better world-system, a new and better United States, is a task that requires repeated effort by repeated generations. But another world is indeed possible (albeit not inevitable). And we can make a difference. Occupy Wall Street is making a difference, a big difference.