A New Form of Protest

written by Riad Azar | October 23, 2011

Actions sometimes have unintended consequences.

So it was with New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg's decision to use the usual police tactic of setting up free speech zones for protestors. Little did he know that when the demonstrators were forced behind bars and barricades like prisoners and severed from the location of protest to smash all germination of symbolism, the movement would be strengthened. And ultimately, as we are seeing today more than one month into the #OccupyWallStreet rebellion, it is still growing.

The first day was full of confusion, with protestors ultimately ending up in Zuccotti Park, where they broke into working groups to try to make some decisions on the next steps. Camp was being set in the park while decisions were made regarding beds, food, safety, and back up plans in the likelihood that the NYPD—a force so determined that they recently claimed they have the power to shoot a plane out of the sky—decided to break up the demonstration. What I'd like to do is explore some of the unexpected factors that have allowed a ragtag group of about two hundred to grow into a movement that as of last weekend (10/15/11, Global Day of Rage) has had demonstrations spanning five continents. It can now be said that the sun does not set on the #OccupyWallStreet rebellion. What are the characteristics of the successful demonstrations of the 21st century that the activist mind rooted in 20th century strategy must learn to grapple with, and the controversies that have erupted because of a resistance to this evolution.

Liberty Plaza, the former name of Zuccotti Park but one that has been revitalized by the demonstrators, is a gift that people are beginning to appreciate. It was the spark that created the people power we now see everyday on the streets of New York and around the world. The first week invited its fair share of criticism; "they are so far from Wall St.," "they are going to be choked in a free speech zone," "they will freeze to death, catch pneumonia, bed bugs, attract rodents, or just be ignored." Without the park as a base camp, and by irritating the police everyday with unpermitted marches and acts of civil disobedience, the NYPD would have had no problem rounding the protesters up, shoving them into their barred police buses, and hauling them away. But the police found themselves on an odd footing when the protestors began living in the park; because of the "privately held / publicly accessible" nature of Zuccotti Park, the police had no legal justification to remove the protestors and smack off the gadfly. So long as a few rules were obeyed, such as being forbidden from putting up structures (tents and tarps) within the park, the general set of rules concerning parks as written by the NYC Parks and Recreation authority did not apply. Therefore, the closing hours of midnight to six in the morning were invalid and the demonstrators had a home from which to conduct further actions. This is the first point that gave the demonstrators the ability to survive long enough for the mainstream media to not be able to ignore them. I am sure the NYPD is kicking itself now when they realize they have actually given protestors the best location, an area that they are allowed to stay in and where they can organize more actions and draw in more people and supporters. In a classic move that we will look back on and laugh about, Brookfield Properties, the company that owns Liberty Plaza, has put up "No Camping" signs along all of its other properties.

Another rule that the demonstrators must follow if they are to remain in the park lawfully was also a blessing in disguise: no amplification. Being unable to use any kind of amplification system the protestors have developed their own way to communicate. When someone is speaking, their words are repeated by the group around them, not only allowing others to hear what the original speaker is

saying but also giving everyone the ability to process exactly what was said as they chant. Here we have the birth of the human microphone, or the call and response system that has so powerfully characterized the movement's presence especially in videos accessible on the Internet and Youtube. We all know the typical leftist/progressive protest; every cause shows up with their supporters and their posters, and their megaphones to try to drown out everyone else's cause. While #OccupyWallStreet still has a somewhat infinite amount of political causes that rally behind it, the inability for everyone to be screaming them at the same time has created a unified social force. Without amplification it is known that no one can have their point heard when they would like to speak unless they assist in getting the voices of everyone else heard by the call and response human microphone system. This cannot be ignored as one of the prime examples of solidarity building that is crucial in order for a movement to stick together as it battles the tests of nature, the police, public opinion, capital, and the media.

During the civil rights movements some of the most personally moving moments came when protestors were being confronted, arrested, and terrorized by police dogs and began to sing in unison, forcing the police to confront them as fellow humans and in many cases moving the police to question their own rationale for conducting such inhumane actions. Imagine how the officers are feeling when everyone listens to everyone and every voice is lifted to make sure the voice of everyone is heard, especially when each individual is given the right to have their voice amplified by the human microphone and not just the useless babble of a power hungry leader while the rest follow along to create the illusion of unity in the face of an enemy. It has even been reported that police are beginning to use the human microphone to dispatch information to the protestors. When writer Naomi Wolf was arrested on October 18th, protestors marched to the police precinct; the police outside used the human microphone to announce that she had been released with a summons and even used the temperature check (the system where protestors are asked whether they feel good, not so good, or bad about certain proposals) to help protestors feel confident in their next move on returning to Liberty Plaza.

The police also must be thanked for providing the rebellion with the spark that finally smashed through the media iron curtain, with their ever-so-famous brutality toward innocent civilians. While #OccupyWallStreet was going on for a week or so during the media blackout, the mass arrests and inexcusable actions of police brutality that befell protestors during one march was the spark that got everyone paying attention. Of course police brutality happens all the time and the only reason the media is paying attention is because it happened to a group of middle class white kids; nevertheless, if it got the media there let the media play their game. No press is bad press. The rebellion can use their momentum to draw public attention to an issue that has been too often ignored.

The "leaderless-ness" of the movement allows everyone to be empowered while resisting the ideological drive towards authoritarian sentiments and leadership fetishization. If everyone is the leader, not only does the NYPD not have a target, but the protestors themselves are empowered to take part in the General Assembly and working groups and to not feel the pressure that we all know can smash the backs of the organizers and facilitators of a demonstration, organization, or movement. More importantly we are seeing the shift away from identity-based politics and fractured sectarian political movements. The media has no idea what to do with this because it is not structured in the media-friendly way of concentrating on a certain issue with a very specific set of demands and a point scale of whether or not politicians will pay attention.

The lack of a presence of a list of demands is a question that has been on everyone's mind either because they have a genuine interest in seeing a structuring to the growing movement to make themselves more comfortable with it or they have become so frustrated and cannot see past the fact that the movement does not conform to the traditional chokehold standards of politics in the 20th century. There cannot be a specific set of demands because it is not an issue-based protest, which

makes it so odd for Americans who have been used to issue-based political activism for so long. It should be acknowledged that we can finally all come together and say, you know what? The WHOLE system is broken, and we need to begin the conversation for a complete restructuring of our social, economic, and political systems.

It is a structuring of the mind pushed by the corporate media to assume that movements require an empirical set of demands to either be met or ignored or partially addressed. By agreeing with this 20th century view of political protests we are forgetting our main weapon: that this protest is a rejection of the entire system, thus the only demand we can have is the demand to get up and come out to help create a new society. And to the political activists who have said that they will not participate unless there is a clear centralized list of demands, I find this to be narcissism on their part. They are in fact saying, I must decide for myself whether or not this cause is worth my time, worth my being there, and worth my active participation instead of realizing that the process that takes place in Liberty Plaza and the other occupations around the country and the world is the democratic process that they are so alienated from participating in. There are countless people that I meet everyday in my interactions with fellow demonstrators at the park who say, "after joining the General Assembly, and really feeling like my voice is heard in a democratic process I can't stay away, I've been here for five days in a row just because I have been sucked into the joy that is a legitimate, people-centered and empowering decision-making process."

While confronting the issue of whether or not a list of demands is necessary we are like the confused and angry characters that appear in John Steinbeck's famous Great Depression era novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Standing on their porches with guns ready to take down the driver of the bulldozer that is heading for their livelihood and all that they call their own in this world, they state that there must be an enemy, a clear target to shoot, they will not let anyone be able to get away with the horrendous action of ripping apart families, destroying lives, and trampling over generations of memories. They are crestfallen and confused when they realize that it is not one man, that if you kill the driver of the bulldozer another man who needs the $3 per day will come to replace him, that if you kill the bankers who are giving the orders they will send out another board of directors from the east coast, and that if you go take out what is happening in board rooms on the east coast there is an army of financiers who serve under them ready to take their place while the shooter rots away in jail. What we are confronting is a man-made monster, one that is created by humans but does not have a face to blame when we all collectively participate in our own destruction.

Thus, the actions that moved the occupy wall street protest into the area it is taking place in right now—the park—the solidarity building methods caused by the lack of amplification, and the leaderless, demand-less nature have benefited and have begun moving the protest on a historical progression: this is a new form of protest for a new stage of history.

Riad Azar graduated from William Paterson University in 2011. After spending half a year traveling through South America, writing about and participating in politics, he was overjoyed to find #OcuppyWallStreet on his return home. He can be reached at riadazar1 (at) gmail.com.